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Confident Pluralism: Wrestling with the Loss of Christendom toward a Winsome Witness

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Abstract: The church in the North Atlantic world functions in many ways out of the memory of its former role within Christendom. Having moved into a post-Christian era, the methodologies and imagination fostered by the church's habits developed within Christendom inhibit rather than advance the vocation of the church, which is to herald the Gospel to the world. This paper describes our new situation along with some of its challenges, and while admitting the church is often unprepared in terms of training for and knowledge of the new landscape in which the church finds itself, nevertheless, there is some wisdom from the past that can help the church faithfully advance the mission of God in which it is called to participate.

Introduction

It was fifteen months into one of the most iconic journeys of American history. Lewis and Clark along with their team were about to crest the highest point they had encountered thus far. Having been commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson to chart a path to the Pacific Ocean for the sake of transcontinental travel and especially for the sake of expanding commerce, Lewis and Clark were anxious for what they'd behold the next morning. They expected to see a brief descent down to a gentle plain before reaching the Pacific Ocean. Under the stars of looming excitement, they could barely sleep. No one had ever journeyed this far. No one had ever seen what they were about to behold. This is was an historical moment if there ever was one. As morning dawned and the sunrise basked the landscape in a gentle glow, they ascended the final rise with an energetic quickness that their pace had not achieved since setting off all

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those months ago. They reached the crest and took in the view and it was indeed as awe-inspiring as they expected. Yet simultaneously, one of the travelers reported, it was one of the most terrifying views he had ever witnessed. For there was no gentle slope down to the Pacific Ocean. Instead, the rolling plain before them stretched only a short distance before ascending steeply and terrifyingly. What they had witnessed for the first time as seasoned adventurers were mountains they had never dreamed of encountering. When they departed, they assumed that their path across the continent would continue very much like the plains and gentle rises that characterized the portion of North America which lay behind them. The only mountains they had ever navigated were the undaunting Appalachians. But now, before them lay a situation for which they never knew they needed to prepare. Trained to navigate waterways and tolerate the occasional need to portage their canoes, they now had massive adjustments to make. They'd leave the canoes behind. They'd find guidance and help from the Native Americans. They'd later build new canoes from burnt trees. But ultimately, they'd be making it up as they go, negotiating new circumstances they had never expected. These adventurers had to learn, as Tod Bolsinger puts it, how to "canoe the mountains."[1]

For twenty-first century Christians, our situation is similar. It's been over 1,700 years since we've lived in a culture where Christianity was not the dominant religion, where we enjoyed the benefits of legal support that opened a space for more than a millennium and a half of flourishing and massive global growth. But now that era is behind us. And it's scary. And out of fear, there are many moments when, in order to survive and keep going, we act in ways that are detrimental to our very goals, undermining ourselves and compromising our ability even to sustain an existence, much less consider the possibility of flourishing once again. Like Lewis and Clark, perhaps we thought that the way it was is the way it always would be. Like them, we have not been trained for this and so we are unprepared. But like them, in just the same way, we must face down what is in front of us. Sometimes that will mean the risky move of making it up as we go, an exceedingly scary proposal given 1,700 years of doing things in more or less the same ways under the same circumstances.

The end of Christendom affects us and our involvement in God's mission to bring the Good News to all the earth. We are struggling; and in troubling ways, we are unwittingly hampering our own efforts.

In this article, I want to discuss two things. First, I want to acknowledge how the end of Christendom[2] affects us and our involvement in God's mission to bring the Good News to all the earth. We are struggling; and in troubling ways, we are unwittingly hampering our own efforts. Yet, prior to Christendom, there were similarities for the church to our current

situation in the world, and so there is hope. Second, then, I want to suggest some concrete ideas that might animate how we negotiate our identity as the church with confidence in this new, pluralistic world that we haven't known for 1,700 years.

Wrestling with the End of Christendom

In an almost prophetic statement that seems truer now than at the time it was written, the preeminent American sociologist Robert Nisbet wrote in 1975 that we live in a twilight age. "Periodically in Western history," Nisbet says, "twilight ages make their appearance." He continues,

> Processes of decline and erosion of institutions are more evident than those of genesis and development. Something like a vacuum obtains in the moral order for large numbers of people. Human loyalties, uprooted from accustomed soil, can be seen tumbling across the landscape with no scheme of larger purpose to fix them. Individualism reveals itself less as achievement and enterprise than as egoism and mere performance. Retreat from the major to the minor, from the noble to the trivial, the communal to the personal, and from the objective to the subjective is commonplace. There is a widely expressed sense of degradation of values and corruption of culture. The sense of estrangement from community is strong.[3]

Perhaps more prescient now than forty-five years ago, Nisbet's words ring strikingly true. We Christians find ourselves in strange territory indeed, facing a landscape for which we have not been prepared.

In 2016, the Jewish political and public policy theorist Yuval Levin said that we live in a "fractured republic." He sought to diagnose how we got here and to suggest some helpful ways forward.[4] In 2018, US Senator from Nebraska, Ben Sasse, observed that we live in a culture of "us vs. them," strongly suggesting that because of the fractured nature of our republic, we find both meaningfulness and satisfaction in the various ways that we take sides, attack the other, and achieve a sense of righteousness for not being "one of them."[5]

This fracturing and fragmentation are nothing new for us Christians. One need only to refer to the history of the church since the Reformation to see how denominationalism and the myriad claims to true and pure orthodoxy reflect a familiar reality for all of us. What is perhaps a bit newer and more visible on a large scale is the internal fracturing that is happening within established church bodies like our own, their members and leaders dividing into parties, camps, tribes, and the like. Some members of these groups even imagine the possibility of future church splits and the emergence of ever more spin-off denominations.

In the 1980s, the late British missiologist and former missionary to India, Lesslie Newbigin, began to describe our Western, North Atlantic world, as pluralistic.[6] By

this he simply meant that there is a "manyness" that characterizes our culture, that we live in a world of competing allegiances, and that the decline of Christianity as the dominant motivating and imagination-shaping force in our culture indicates that we have moved into a post-Christian era. Many have added their voice to Newbigin's in agreeing with his assessment concerning the post-Christian nature of our time. This has caused many Christians to feel, as Nisbet described, distant and estranged from the community we once thought of as home. As recently as the 1950s, the American church experienced perhaps its zenith, enjoying wide cultural approval and exceedingly broad influence. Now, with such a drastic change over just seventy years, the church is reeling and in a state of shock, grasping for anything that might help us feel, as Nisbet said, "rooted" once again.

As the church has sought to navigate this new reality and negotiate its own identity in the midst of it, various scholars and analysts have tried to point the way forward, sometimes by pointing out trouble spots. One of the things we've learned is just how negatively many people in our culture perceive the church.[7] We are seen as antagonistic, closed-minded, exclusionary, elitist, and self-righteous. If we consider these characteristics from a personal perspective, most of us don't like meeting or spending time with other people who exhibit them, so it's no surprise that those who are not a part of the church are often "turned-off" by it, finding the church unattractive and increasingly irrelevant. Add to this more recent data about the growth of the so-called "nones" or religiously unaffiliated (now standing at about 26% of Americans[8]), and it's no leap to see that our post-Christian era evokes a strong sense that we are trying to witness and minister amongst a people who don't need a god.

So we feel frustrated, worn-out, and confused. We feel what the contemporary sociologist of culture James Davison Hunter has called a sense of "*ressentiment*"—a feeling of loss because we believe something has been taken away from us.[9] In particular he refers to this in terms of the former cultural dominance that the church experienced within Christendom. What we have lost is not just a familiar, comfortable way of being faithful Christians in our time where we could safely assume that most other people shared, if not our faith, then at least our moral values and our general view of the world in one manner or another. We also sense that we have lost our place at the table, as it were. We find that our voice no longer matters and, that in many senses, it is not wanted. In response, Hunter says, we scramble to blame someone—the liberals if we are conservatives and the conservatives if we are liberals. We begin to find our identity in this post-Christian age by determining who the real enemy is and setting ourselves up in standing against them, striving at times at least for their

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silencing, if not their total elimination. Hunter argues that when most other members of the North Atlantic world shared in common a similar set of convictions—often referred to as a Judeo-Christian worldview—the church occupied a space of power and influence that no longer exists. But he suggests, given the loss of comfort that comes with such privilege, the church wants it back. In order to recover it, we engage in what is often referred to as a culture war with those who are characterized as opposing our way of life. Such efforts on this warpath have further distanced people from the church and stand as a case-in-point concerning the critique of the church as antagonistic.

Complicating this matter, the internal church fragmentations that I mentioned earlier make it difficult for the church to advance the cause of the Gospel because there is too much attention focused inwardly, seeking to blame, flame, and shame those who don't take the right side. For a church body like our own, which, over and against any other body, has long believed that we are the guardians of orthodoxy, this creates the conditions for the awkward and ironic existence of various internal groups which stand in competition with one another for a kind of political allegiance, each claiming to represent the truest of true orthodoxies. This internal fetishism for who counts amongst the real puritans of our tribe constitutes a complete distraction from what Newbigin would call the vocation of the church,[10] referring to its missionary identity as the carrier of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. For many whose hope it is simply to believe, teach, and confess in service to the Gospel and our Lord Jesus Christ, there is a haunting fear that around any corner there may be someone lurking, seeking to castigate them. They fear having crossed some unknown line that marked the boundaries of an apparent *ur*-orthodoxy, which now functions to mark them as some kind of heretic, exiled to the island of the irredeemable. I think the historian Sophia Rosenfeld captures this phenomenon well when she observes that it is often our particular political commitments—in this case, those made to select fragments of our church body—that determine what we will accept, what ideas we will consider, and what people we are willing to associate with.[11] Again, this is a severe distraction from our calling to witness to the Gospel in our post-Christian world.

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How do we get recruited to such a vision that this is what we ought to be doing as Christians? How do we see such behaviors are justified on the basis that the true Gospel will never shine forth unless the body is purified? To answer, returning to Hunter's analysis is helpful. In our post-Christian world where the church no longer

enjoys its former cultural dominance, there is a scrambling to recover what has been lost.[12] Hunter indicates that a lack of imagination plays a role here, with many believing that the only way to be the church is to be the church as it was during Christendom. Hunter disagrees. He, along with many others, see a significant problem with the alignment of the church with cultural and state mechanisms of power, a relationship of co-extensivity that has historically been the case throughout Christendom (in practice, if not in doctrine). Hunter does not believe the church should align with power in any respect, only because the very power of God is shown forth in the powerlessness of Christ in His submission to false-accusation, punishment, and death. We see it again in St. Paul's boasting in his weakness. And again, in the choosing of a rag-tag bunch of disciples whose frail humanity and finite understanding showed forth each time Jesus sought to teach them.

Yet Hunter is honest that power is attractive.[13] And when one loses the dominant position, the temptation to recover it is almost too much to overcome. So he suggests that, lacking a strong and comfortable sense of identity as members of the dominant bloc, we dig in our heels in order to prevent any further loss and we sharpen our vision in order to spot those people, practices, and commitments which are to blame for the loss so far. From them we craft for ourselves a new enemy. And so our identity morphs, making us not just externally antagonistic such that the world knows the church better for what it's against than what it's for. Even more, we are antagonistic internally, evermore seeking to find ourselves in the right camp, on the right side of history, and ultimately, on the side of righteousness where our own souls seem convinced that our work of protecting theology is what will finally redeem us.[14] Hunter laments our inability to recognize our complicity in perpetuating the status of the church further into the category of negative perception, seating ourselves more deeply within a post-Christian situation, while all along we believe that our efforts will get us out of this mess.

Hope in Uncharted Territory

So, what is a church to do that experiences both pluralism without as well as within? How can our witness once again be faithful and—as it often has been throughout Christian history—winsome? If the church is distracted from its primary vocation, how can we renew our attentiveness and return to faithfulness? St. Peter encourages a tirelessly winsome witness in his first letter. Perhaps one of the most referenced passages in that letter tells us to be ready to give an answer for the hope that we

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have (1 Pt 3:15b). While regularly used by those who think that apologetics by proposition and polemic is the kind of evangelistic strategy that we need in the present moment, the text is more faithfully read when we hear Peter encouraging those persecuted Christians to whom his letter is addressed to live differently. He exhorts them to live in manner that causes people to ask them questions, ones that will allow them finally to speak about the hope that both motivates and empowers their living witness. This strategy is the very kind of witness that Gerald Sittser characterizes as not just winsome, but resilient.[15] It's the embodiment of a confident pluralism. One in which faithful confession is possible, a winsome witness subversively influential, and all this without requiring compromise. The classic reference to the second-century *Letter to Diognetus*, written by an unknown author, helps us to picture the nature of what both Peter and Sittser are telling us.

> For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. 2 Corinthians 10:3 They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Philippians 3:20 They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.[16]

So how do we exhibit this kind of winsome resilience? How can the church move toward a winsome witness in this age after Christendom? To whom do we look for help and where should we look for models?

One of things that I want to highlight in an overall way before discussing specifics is that the primary condition necessary for the Gospel to be heard and for it to spread is human

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interaction via relationships. St. Paul makes this abundantly clear when drawing on the prophet Isaiah. The prophet wrote, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Is 52:9). St. Paul rhetorically uses Isaiah's words as he seeks to persuade the Roman recipients of his letter to acknowledge the necessity that they, as members of the church, are called to take the good news out into the world to share it with others, so that everyone may call upon the name of the Lord. Paul writes,

> As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:11–15)

An ecology of relationships is what underlies all of what I will propose here. And I am thinking of more than just strangers bumping into strangers. Instead, what is critical are relationships characterized by at least a bit of trust, where people know about one another's lives and are mutually interested in the other person for some reason or another. The relationships need not be deep or long-term, but they must have an element of significance to them that exists below the surface of passing interactions.

What is critical are relationships characterized by at least a bit of trust, where people know about one another's lives and are mutually interested in the other person for some reason or another.

I discussed antagonism above, both as a feature of how the church (or the individual Christian) observably relates to the world, how church bodies relate to one another, and how church members sometimes relate internally to other members. First then, I want to suggest that thinking about those particular kinds of relationships is essential. And we have to think particularly about what it is we are aiming for in these relationships. I've already noted that we Christians find ourselves in a world where many view us, our institutions, and our message as irrelevant—we simply don't matter much to outsiders and thus there's not a lot of reason for them to pay attention. Yet, there's a sense of antagonism that we need to pay attention to because it hinders our witness. And that antagonism, I would argue, is uni-directional. While many claim that we live in a culture that is hostile to Christians and the message of Jesus, I think we construe the situation that way because we feel the loss and *ressentiment* that

Hunter noted, not because we experience regular hostility from most people. We are not significant enough for people to take that kind of time. Aside from militant secularists who come in various stripes but whose numbers are quite small, the only other ongoing fear that seems to be on our radar concerns religious freedom. There might be some legitimate concerns here, but we might also ask ourselves first whether the threat to religious freedom is actually our fault. With what has come to the surface of public awareness in recent decades—the scandals, moral failures, and the church's ongoing complicity with many of our culture's greatest sins: racism, pedophilia, sexism, colonialism, and more, which the church sometimes addresses with subversive attempts at cover-ups or justifications—there's more than enough reason for outsiders and even ourselves to conclude that our house is a mess, and the public knows it. Our house might not be the only one that's a mess, but we shoot our witness in the foot when our response is to try to pretend that it isn't, or to pretend that we are victims of some kind of illegitimate hostility when religious freedom is threatened, say, by suggesting the elimination of tax-exempt status for religious organizations.

All this is to say that the primary antagonist in the church's relationship to the world is the church. We are not, as the church in the North Atlantic world, experiencing persecution that's anything like that of the Early Church or present-day Christians who live in other parts of the world.[17] Hunter argues that the church should not expect to hold a dominant place in Western culture again.[18] That means we have to settle with the pluralistic situation we have—the mountains stand before us and we need to find a way to navigate them.

The legal scholar John Inazu gives helpful guidance for those of us who desire, for the sake of our witness, to engage with outsiders in a way that is less antagonistic.[19] If our pluralistic situation is *our* situation, then how can we negotiate it with confidence, practicing a confident pluralism wherein we might participate in what he calls a "modest unity" in this world we share together without undercutting our ultimate commitments?[20] Perhaps his best suggestion helps us see what we ought to be aiming for in our relationships with others, allowing us to thrive in the midst of our deep differences. He recommends abandoning the effort to bridge ideological gaps and instead focus on relational ones.

Ideology is a troublesome feature of our age. The unique nature of an ideology, one which makes it quite different from a religion, is that with ideology there is no way out, no room for repentance, adjustment, renegotiation, change, or where appropriate, compromise.[21] Ideologues are truly blind to inconsistencies and other troubles with their own belief system. They work overtime to justify and reconcile anything that might be presented as an objection. The possibility for thinking differently isn't easily evoked for ideologues.

So Inazu recommends that we not seek first to deal with the deep differences between us and others, which he suggests, lie close to the level of ideology. Instead of

assuming that we cannot associate with someone else until we've settled our ideological disagreements, Inazu commends bridging relational gaps and bracketing out the ideological differences because we are powerless to adequately address them without relationships.[22] What does this look like? Jesus models it in the sense that He never let an issue stand in the way of a relationship. Think of the woman at the well (John 4), Nicodemus (Jn 3:1–21), Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1–10), and all other sinners. And thank God that this is His default approach, otherwise none of us would be here.

Bridging relational gaps is not strange or difficult, but it is perhaps something we are out of practice in doing. The MIT researcher Sherry Turkle notes that this might be because we are often "alone together"—too easily distracted by realities that we can curate for ourselves inside the glass screens we keep in our purses and pockets. Her research suggests that our capacity for conversation and empathy take a bit more effort these days.[23] Yet, bridging relational gaps is the sort of thing any of us can do. It's as easy as having a conversation about the weather, sports, work, your kids, what you did last weekend, and so on. It happens through the simple kinds of conversations wherein people just chat and relate. These are profoundly powerful, if only because they humanize others. Before we got to know the other person, it was easy to hold him or her at a distance, objectify, or label them, which allows us (following Rosenberg's reflection) to decide for one reason or another whether we will associate with them. Perhaps through engaging with others in these basic forms of human relationality, we might slowly see that they're not so bad. But even more, because they are relating to *you* they might get to know a Christian and realize that *you're* not so bad, and perhaps trustworthy. This creates a kind cross-pressure in our relationships. The other person will bear witness to your life and character through conversation and time together, and this experience might begin to fragilize their previous commitments, whether that was some kind of negative Christian stereotype or an alternative allegiance altogether. Rather than viewing the "other" as so different from me that I can't relate, getting to know them forces me to realize that they are much more like me than I had previous imagined. Charles Taylor describes this process well as it applies to our engagements with non-Christians, but his idea can apply even more broadly, such as when applied to those with whom we disagree in our own church body. Taylor writes,

> This kind of multiplicity of faiths has little effect as long as it is neutralized by the sense that being like them is not really an option for me. As long as the alternative is strange and other, perhaps despised, but perhaps just too different, too weird, too incomprehensible, so that becoming *that* isn't really conceivable for me, so long will their difference not undermine my embedding in my own faith.
>
> This changes when through increased contact, interchange, even perhaps inter-marriage, the other becomes more and more like me, in everything else but faith: same activities, professions, opinions, tastes, etc. Then the issue

> posed by the difference becomes more insistent: why my way and not hers? There is no other difference left to make the shift preposterous or unimaginable.[24]

When we work to bridge the relational gap, Taylor describes the cross-pressure involved in this process as having a fragilizing effect. Beliefs become questionable, and alternatives considerable. To the extent that the Spirit is at work in this midst of our relationships, the possibility that God might be drawing our conversation partners to Him is ever-present. In this way, we can refer to basic interactions like chatting and relating as forms of witness, valid evangelistic activities in our time that might not mention the name of Jesus yet, but which nevertheless create encounters where, following St. Paul's words, people might meet the Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20). In the midst of our relationships, the Christian way of life becomes plausible and our commitment to Christ persuasive. We pray in the midst of all this, that the Spirit might open a door to give the Good News.

In the midst of our relationships, the Christian way of life becomes plausible and our commitment to Christ persuasive. We pray in the midst of all this, that the Spirit might open a door to give the Good News.

A second thing for us to consider here is our commitment to all this. What I mean here has nothing to do with a gut-check on whether or not we really take seriously our membership in the priesthood of all believers. Rather, I'm asking how long we are willing to invest in what is required for a winsome witness in our time. John Inazu argues that one of the most needed civic virtues for our time is patience.[25] His example of patience is helpful in that he compares it to someone giving their life to a task which may not be finished before one's life come to an end. Of course, the primary example of this is Jesus, and subsequently His disciples. We could say the same for the great host of witnesses who have run the race before us. Civically, we can point to people like Abraham Lincoln or MLK on the issue of racial justice, for example. None of these tasks is finished. They require ongoing commitment and patience to engage in a long-term way.

Inazu's suggestion resonates strongly with the work of Alan Kreider, the Early Church historian who argues that the growth of the Early Church was something like a patient fermentation.[26] Or we can look to Rodney Stark's work, which plots out the growth of the Early Church using the best sociologically informed data available, noting that in the Roman Empire prior to experiencing the full effects of the Edict of Milan, Christianity grew at a rate of about 3.4% of the population per year, or from about one thousand Christians in AD 40 to roughly 31 million by the middle of the fourth century.[27] The church grew, Stark says, because of the centrality of personal

relationships and the networks that linked people who would share the Gospel with others. When we are talking about the period of three centuries, or about fifteen generations, this was not a fast process.[28] It was a patient fermentation that required a long and dedicated obedience in the same direction.[29]

A third approach comes from James Davison Hunter. It helps us think about the benefits of shifting from a posture of antagonism to one that is more positive. Hunter believes that one of the ways that the church could become more fruitful in its witness throughout the coming decades might be, on the one hand, to keep quiet when it comes to criticism.[30] He suggests that our witness in this regard has been so ill-received, that he wonders if we should stop speaking critically to and about our world or culture—for a season. His point might be hyperbolic, but it's worth heeding only to the extent that his reasoning for staying quiet is measurably justifiable. But he doesn't end there. One the other hand, he suggests a different posture, one that he calls "faithful presence," which imagines the church—both as institution and as a body of people—as existing in a posture *for* others.[31] Perhaps helpful here, would be to hear echoes of Luther's doctrine of vocation in Hunter's proposal, since he gives primacy to our local places of influence, which are often very similar to Luther's four estates or realms of serving others in vocation. Bonhoeffer's words about human life and relationships are also helpful for interpreting Hunter. Bonhoeffer views humans as "beings-for-one-another."[32] In a manner similar to how we regularly say that God and heaven don't need our good works but our neighbor does, Bonhoeffer's conception visualizes human life as aimed outward toward others in a relationship of service and care. Faithful presence, in Hunter's proposal, imagines the church as aimed externally, postured toward caring for the world in which it is situated. In this way, to riff on Bonhoeffer, the church might become known more for what it is *for* than what it is against.

Finally, it ought to be said that none of what I'm suggesting is comfortable. Living in a pluralistic society, particularly in an age where being aware of and concerned about the differences between us and our neighbors has become inescapable, has caused some fragility even for the most ardent believers amongst us. I get it. Yet when I feel myself wanting to resist, complain, or wish that we could just return to some easier time, the scholar in me is reminded that no such time ever really existed; and the Holy Spirit in me goads me onward in the knowledge that in following Jesus, He never made any promises that it will all be easy. What He did promise is that He would be with us always, even to the end of the age (Mt 28:20).

There will be stubbed toes, scraped knees, and broken bones—we are feeble vessels. But God has chosen us, nonetheless. And it's for such a time as this. It always is when God does the choosing.

So we are in new territory. We aren't prepared. We weren't trained for this. But there is wisdom to be found if we are open to hearing it and learning from the past. Repentance characterizes the Christian life, and we'll have to be doing plenty of that. There will be stubbed toes, scraped knees, and broken bones—we are feeble vessels. But God has chosen us, nonetheless. And it's for such a time as this. It always is when God does the choosing.

So let me end with a blessing: May the God who called you to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth empower, energize, and equip you with patience, discernment, urgency, and boldness as you proclaim the Good News to the world. May He help you lean upon the past so that you can venture into the future. May He give you impossible frontiers to traverse so that in Him, you may believe that all is made possible. May He give you unscalable heights, so that when He brings you to the pinnacle, you make look back at the grandeur of the journey that began when He said to you, "come, follow me." May He sanctify your speech and season your actions so that all who meet you might ultimately meet Jesus, that all may hear the Good News and come to know Him and may be saved. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

[1] This is based on the opening illustration Tod Bolsinger narrates much more eloquently in his book *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2016).

[2] Readers should note that *Christendom* is not a synonym for *Christianity*. While *Christianity* can refer in the broad sense to the collection of Christian teachings, beliefs, practices, and traditions, *Christendom* should be understood in a more restricted way. Among scholars, the typical understanding of *Christendom* is that period of time in the West, extending roughly from the Edict of Milan in the fourth century to the late twentieth century during which church and state regularly exhibited evidence of a co-extensive relationship. For the purposes of this paper, the nature of that co-extensive relationship that most concerns us is how the church relied on the power of the state to exert and maintain a characteristically Christian influence in Western society. Scholars began to document, analyze, and comment on the decoupling of the church from the state and wrestling with the "end of Christendom" in the last half of the twentieth century.

[3] Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), xi.

[4] Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

[5] Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal* (New York: St. Martin's, 2018).

[6] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

[7] See for example David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) and his earlier work *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

[8] See the recent survey data published by the Pew Research Center: "In U.S., Christianity Continues to Decline at Rapid Pace," October 17, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.
[9] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 107–108. Hunter explains, "Nietzsche's definition of this French word included what we in the English-speaking world mean by resentment, but it also involves a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action. *Ressentiment* is, then, a form of political psychology." Hunter, *To Change the World*, 107.
[10] See Michael Goheen, *The Vocation of the Church: Lesslie Newbigin's Missional Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).
[11] Sophia Rosenfeld, "Truth and Consequences" in *The Hedgehog Review* 21, no. 2 (2019): 18–24.
[12] This is felt on both the right and left (or within conservative and progressive forms of Christianity), Hunter argues. See his description of the approach each takes in Hunter, *To Change the World*, Essay II, chapters 2–3.
[13] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 106–107; Essay II, chapter 7.
[14] For additional insight into this phenomenon, see Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018), 42–49.
[15] Gerald L. Sittser, *Resilient Faith: How the Early Christian "Third Way" Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019).
[16] Trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 5.1–10, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm.
[17] The Center for the Study of Global Christianity reports that in 2016, roughly 90,000 Christians were martyred, which amounts to about one death every six minutes. See Samuel Smith, "Over 900,000 Christians Martyred for their Faith in Last 10 Years: Report," *The Christian Post*, January 16, 2017, https://www.christianpost.com/news/over-900000-christians-martyred-for-their-faith-in-last-10-years-report-173045/.
[18] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 201–202.
[19] Inazu, *Confident Pluralism.*
[20] Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*, 15.
[21] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (New York: Shocken, 1971), 7. See also David Walton, *Doing Cultural Theory* (London: Sage, 2012), 77–78.
[22] Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*, 121–124.
[23] See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); see also *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015).
[24] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap and Harvard University), 304.
[25] Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*, 90.
[26] Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbably Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).
[27] Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

[28] It is important to note that Stark and Kreider are focused specifically on the effects of what we might call the congregational engagement of the Early Church, which they show to be effective in urban areas. Stark's work has been questioned however, especially in terms of its relevance to the growth of the church among rural populations. Furthermore, while congregations are essential to the mission of God, we must remember the importance of missional organizations. The missiologist Ralph Winter described congregations (and/or church bodies) and missional organizations as, respectively, modalities and sodalities. Stark and Kreider do not account for the relationship of necessity between these two—that is, that modalities need sodalities as they participate in the mission of God, as Winter convincingly argues. See Ralph D. Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission" in *Missiology: A Review* 2, no. 1 (1974): 121–139.
[29] Here I'm borrowing a phrase from Eugene Peterson.
[30] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 281.
[31] Hunter, *To Change the World*, Essay III.
[32] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. III, trans. Douglas Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 62–63.