

The Loss of Christian Peoplehood

– Kevin Perrotta –

Why the proliferation of church institutions is failing to stem the erosion of Christian living.

On a recent Friday evening my wife and I were sitting in a cafe and our conversation turned to friends whose marriages have ended in divorce. We began to make a list. We named people we went to high school with, roommates we had when we were single, church members we have worshipped with over the years, even the couple who helped us return to Christ some 20 years ago. Perhaps not surprisingly the list is a long one. We were saddened to contemplate at one time the wreckage of so many of our friends' bright hopes for marital happiness.

Probably anyone with leadership responsibilities in the church could compile such a list. And most of us would also have no difficulty compiling other lists of personal tragedy - teens from decent families who have ended up in substance-abuse programs, pastoral leaders who have abandoned the ministry or have destroyed it through moral failures, and so on.

Indeed, it is no secret that we are facing severe difficulties in the churches, difficulties that amount to a crisis in Christian living.

What approach should we take to this situation? Some would say: "Don't get discouraged. Things are hard, but every period has its problems, and good things are happening too."

But while this is true, it is not helpful. What would be helpful is to grasp some of the dynamics that are corroding Christian life among us. Such an understanding could enable us to set directions and priorities.

Toward such an understanding, I propose three observations and a diagnosis.

PROBLEMS AND ANSWER

1. The first observation has often been made: *The churches in America can roughly be divided into those whose institutions are prospering and those whose institutions are troubled.*

In the prospering group are the evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal bodies. For the most part their memberships are increasing; their institutions, denominational and "parachurch," are booming.

In the troubled group are the mainline Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Their institutions are in difficulties of one sort or another-static or declining memberships, little evangelism, shrinking school enrollments, fewer clergy candidates.

Somewhere in between are the American branches of Eastern Orthodoxy.

2. My second observation is that despite differences in institutional well-being, *churches in both categories are experiencing much the same crisis in Christian living.* The divorce rate, to cite a crucial indicator, among Christians of both prospering and troubled Churches approximates the catastrophic national level of 50 percent.

3. The third observation concerns the way we typically respond. Most leaders in the churches have experience with institutions-educational, pastoral, evangelistic, charitable. We know how to run programs. As a result, *our attempts to support Christian living tend to be institutional and programmatic.* If marriages are in trouble, we bring in a program to teach techniques of husband-wife communication. If youth are not making it in the church, we upgrade the youth ministry. If older people or singles are having problems, we set up special activities for older people or singles.

All well and good. But, as we know from experience, insufficient.

The conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that our problems are not primarily rooted in deficiencies in our Christian institutions, for even when they are doing well, they are not doing well enough. Rather, I suggest, ***our problems stem from a loss of Christian Peoplehood and way of life.***

A WAY OF LIFE

An institution, as I mean it here, is a group of individuals joined together for activities toward a common goal: people working together to produce cars or provide medical care or play basketball.

A *people* is a group of human beings sharing a way of life: the American people, the Japanese people, the Jewish people, the Navajo people.

Being a people involves much more than being an institution. The participants in an institution share a limited amount of their time and resources to accomplish certain purposes. A people have their lives intertwined. They have a common way of life-indeed, a common destiny.

Institutions are *part* of peoples. Peoples have institutions that maintain their way of life and pass it on: government schools, armed forces, charitable organizations, professional associations, communications media, and so on. Institutions are the "organs" of a people.

NEW SOCIAL BOND

By its nature, the church is a people. It is Israel according to the Spirit, "God's people," the human race restored to life in the "last Adam" (see I Cor. 10: 18; Gal. 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45).

Now, obviously church life involves institutions. We must have regular ways of coming together for Sunday worship, for instructing children, for outreach. And so we have the paid and volunteer staffs of congregations, schools, hospitals, missionary programs, and organizations of every kind. In many ways, the basic units of our churches-congregations, parishes, dioceses, synods-are institutions providing religious services to members.

But Christianity is not just a set of religious activities. Therefore living as Christians involves more than being involved in Christian institutions.

The church is not like an insurance company or a ski club . When the workday is over or the ski weekend comes to an end, insurance or skiing are left behind. People go on to live the rest of their lives. But when the Sunday service is over and people go out to live the rest of their lives, Christianity is not supposed to be left behind at the church door. "The rest of our lives" is where faith in Christ is supposed to make an impact.

God calls us to renounce sinful desires and behavior and cooperate with his Spirit in a process of total personal transformation. He teaches us principles for relating to other people (honesty, love of neighbor, and so on) and obligations in certain relationships (husbands and wives, parents and children,

employers and employees, those who govern and those who are governed, young people and older people-see Eph. 5:22-6:9; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 5:1-2).

Furthermore, Christianity creates **a new social bond, involving new obligations**. Christians are responsible for giving material help to fellow Christians who are in need, for encouraging fellow Christians who are weak in their faith, for following new patterns for resolving disputes among themselves, for exercising and responding to pastoral authority, for leading a life of unity that gives evidence of Christ's lordship (see I John 3:17; Gal. 6:1-2; Matt. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 6:1-7; 1 Thess. 5:12-15; John 17:20-21).

These duties require social "vehicles" for their fulfillment. Christians need to have **concrete patterns of relationships among themselves** in order to follow the biblical teaching to care for one another, be of one mind and heart, bear one another's burdens, support the weak and wavering in faith, offer practical encouragement, resolve wrongdoing and disagreements, and the rest. Christianity requires life together in some form. Just as Christianity is supposed to be "incarnated" in the entire life of the human person, so it is supposed to be "incarnated" in the shared life of a people.

SOCIALLY UNSUPPORTED

What social "vehicle" have American Christians used to live out the Christian way of life and express their bond as Christians? Historically, the vehicle has been American society itself. We have identified with, shared, and attempted to shape the values and patterns of American society. We have expressed our Peoplehood through American society.

However, American society is no longer keyed to the principles and values of its Christian cultural heritage. Thus our only "vehicle" for expressing, or incarnating, our Christian Peoplehood has been commandeered for other purposes. We still have our Christian *institutions* - indeed, more and more of them-but not Christian *Peoplehood*.

This has precipitated the crisis in Christian living. We continue to follow the American way of life, in its various styles, even though it has become inimical to Christianity at many points. We thus find ourselves following a way of life that is geared to principles and values directly contrary to our own expressed beliefs. This development is apparent from pastoral experience and is confirmed by sociological research.

Now that society as a whole no longer fosters Christian living, we are expecting our Christian institutions and programs to compensate. But rather than succeeding at this unnatural task, Christian institutions, no longer part of a larger Christian social life themselves become susceptible to secularization.

Some physical organs malfunction not because of inherent problems but because of adversities experienced by the body as a whole. If the body is subjected to temperature extremes, malnutrition, or poison, otherwise normal organs will become dysfunctional-and then themselves cause further problems. This is what has been happening with our church institutions. Institutions are the organs of a people. At present our Christian institutions are like organs in a body that is suffering a raging fever-or organs transplanted into a foreign body.

CHRISTENDOM

A historical perspective is helpful in understanding this situation.

At different times Christians have tended either to distinguish themselves from the larger society and develop their Peoplehood as a separate culture within it, or to identify with the larger society and treat it as the social vehicle for Christianity-the "Christendom" approach.

In the earliest centuries Christians took the "separate" approach. But with the acceptance of Christianity in the fourth-century Mediterranean world, they largely adopted the Christendom approach. This pattern prevailed in the medieval period and later in the European West and in the Armenian, Byzantine, and Russian East.

The institutional aspects of the church-governing bodies, schools, charitable institutions, monasteries - were embedded in a Christian culture. In one sense the church was a *part* of society: The institutional aspects of the church were ordered parts of society. But in another sense, the church *was* society, and society was the church. All the members of society were part of the church, and society itself was seen as the social expression of Christianity. Christian beliefs officially under girded society. Christian moral norms were expressed in law. "The Christian people" was society as a whole-or society as a whole was one branch of the Christian people, one branch of Christendom.

Men and women lived the Christian life by living up to the accepted standards and ideals of Spain or France or Russia-by being upstanding subjects of those

nations. One could be a good Christian by living according to commonly acknowledged ideals. A Christian could *accept the culture with qualifications*, rather than having to *reject the culture with exceptions*.

MODEL'S WEAKNESSES

Christians differ widely in their evaluation of the Christendom model. All agree that it had its weaknesses:

- Christianity was never the sole cultural influence. Norms, ideals, and customs mixed Christian and non-Christian elements.
- The arrangement made it possible for people to live an external form of Christianity without much personal faith.
- Because church institutions were positioned in the mainstream of society, there was a temptation for individuals to use the church for personal advancement and for the state to use the church for political ends.

Nevertheless, church institutions existed within a culture Christianized to some degree. They were part of the life of the Christian people, however imperfectly the institutions and people as a whole embodied the Christian spirit. The institutions themselves did not bear the whole weight of supporting Christian living. Rather they were the social organs representing the philosophy of life that society as a whole acknowledged, the religious channels through which spiritual life flowed into the culture.

WESTERN SHIFT

The American experiment took a somewhat different approach. Society would no longer be officially Christian, but every form of Christianity would be allowed.

While Christianity was not the official religion, to many people the discrepancy between American ideals and Christian ones did not seem great. Belief in the dignity of the human person, standards of personal integrity and character, norms of family life, and so on, were part of the common inheritance of Western Christian culture. The ideals of the American revolution and the republic were seen as roughly corresponding to Christian ideals. A person who "went with the flow" of American society would to a considerable extent be carried in the right direction, even being dropped off at the church door on Sunday morning.

Many Christians, Protestants at first and then Roman Catholics and Orthodox, regarded America as a Christian society even though the Constitution did not say so. This "mainstream" Protestant approach meant embracing the American way of life, identifying with it, being immersed in it, and attempting to play a shaping role in the political and intellectual mainstream. We attempted to live as the Christian people by living the American way of life.

We sought to protect Christian living by enforcing Christian standards of behavior through the law. To some degree we exercised our social responsibilities to one another as Christians by shaping government policies according to Christian principles. We even handed on the Christian way of life in some measure through the public schools.

The arrangement had some degree of success because even people who were not Christians accepted many basic Christian values and looked to church institutions to form upright citizens. Hostility to Christianity was not broadly acceptable.

DEEPER CONTRASTS

In recent decades, however, the concord of Christianity and prevailing American values has broken down. Already at the founding of the republic, the democratic values and conception of natural law were sundered from their origins in Christian revelation and tradition. Left rootless, these principles and values have now given way to principles and values antithetical to the entire Western tradition, whether in its explicitly Christian or later secularized forms.

The current repudiation of a natural-law basis for human law, the onslaught of abortion and euthanasia, the widespread acceptance of moral relativism, the barbaric youth entertainment, and pornography industries, the shaping of sexual behavior to individualistic agendas—all these represent a profound shift away from the still recognizably Christian society of the recent past. Recent decades have thus seen a lurch forward in the centuries-long transition from the millennium of Christian culture to an entirely post-Christian civilization.

American patterns of life now build from a cultural "genetic code" other than Christianity. Not only do they not facilitate leading a godly life, they actually work against it in such areas as faithfulness in marriage, raising children in the discipline of the Lord, bearing one another's burdens, renouncing the love of money, setting one's heart on things that are above, being of one mind and heart with fellow believers.

The churches have not awakened to this epochal social shift.

We continue to take the "mainstream" approach to American society: We focus on the functioning of church institutions and attempt to support Christian life through programs. We accept American mores, except at points where blatant wrongdoing is directly involved. We emphasize political means for bringing American society into line with Christian values.

It is impossible to be optimistic any longer about this approach, which is rather a formula for the continued secularization of Christian life and, eventually, of Christian institutions as well.

The crisis in Christian living simply cannot be solved by improvements in church institutions. It is true that the decline in Christian discipleship among church members can be traced in some churches to institutional problems, such as official leaders' uncertainty about Christian doctrine and morality or their reluctance to insure that church institutions communicate it faithfully. Where this is the case, reasserting historic Christian teaching is, of course, imperative.

But because church members are failing to live as a people and have adopted cultural patterns that run counter to the Christian way of life, merely bringing church institutions back into line with historic Christian teaching will not be sufficient to turn the situation around.

Our present "mainline" approach will actually expose efforts to maintain the doctrinal integrity of church institutions to constant erosion. If we remain wedded to the now de-Christianized American way of life, more and more aspects of the Christian way of life will seem "impossible." Church leaders will be under increasing pressure to release people from the demands of Christian living by downplaying the seriousness of Christian teaching, rationalizing unfaithfulness to it, or simply keeping silent about it. We will be constantly tempted to lower our pastoral expectations in accordance with the declining level of Christian living.

We have seen this tendency in regard to the norms of chastity before marriage and lifelong faithfulness in marriage, both of which have increasingly seemed unrealistic in recent years. Both Protestants and Catholics have been searching the scriptures and their traditions to find justifications for loosening what appear to be intolerable burdens. Preaching and religious education have muted the doctrines of sin and moral responsibility, of heaven and hell. If we remain immersed in the American way of life, Christianity will continue to

seem like a burden to be eased rather than the source of personal freedom par excellence.

And even if we do preach the word of God in its fullness, the "mainstream" approach fails to provide people with pastoral support equal to the obstacles they encounter. We will become like missionaries who try to save the soul while disregarding the body. Only instead of offering the word to people whose bodies are weakened by hunger or disease, we will be offering it to people whose lives are so shaped by the secular culture that their efforts to bear fruit in Christ are constantly choked off.

In addition, if we continue with the "mainstream" air approach, we are unlikely to transform the social and political order according to a Christian vision of justice and peace. The application of Christian principles to society requires that Christians themselves live the Christian life. But unless Christians are living as a people, experiencing the corporate life of the body of Christ, our individual lives will be constantly undermined by secular tides and even our public policy efforts will be shaped by secular agendas.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

The new social situation requires a new approach.

1. This will mean, first, *reversing our pastoral acquiescence in the American way of life.* Traditionally, given the implicit identification of Christianity and American society, we have minimized the discrepancies between Christianity and the American way of life, limiting them to particulars. A person could be a fine Christian, it was thought, by being what American society considered a fine American-with just a few adjustments. We have accepted American patterns of acquisition and consumption - so long as church institutions are supported ?

- American patterns of career pursuit-with a few reminders about the value of family life.
- American patterns of child-rearing (parental attention, discipline, schooling)-with the addition of some religious "content".
- American patterns of boy-girl relating-with some cautions about sexual morality.
- American patterns of entertainment - with reservations about whatever is

currently at the extreme edge of respectability.

- American patterns of involvement in politics and secular voluntary organizations as adequate for expressing Christian responsibility for neighbors and fellow Christians.

But, as we have been observing, Christianity is no longer America's predominant culture-shaping force. American cultural patterns are now to be presumed inappropriate for Christians until shown otherwise. We must assume that the prevailing ideals and patterns are not suitable for Christians unless in particular instances they can be justified on Christian grounds.

NEW SOCIETY

2. Second, we must begin to redevelop aspects of Christian Peoplehood distinct from American society as a whole.

Concern for church institutions must, of course, continue. Programs will still be important. Efforts to correct social ills should be maintained as an expression of concern for our neighbors. But priority must now be given to initiatives that seek to realize aspects of Christian Peoplehood within American society and distinct from it.

In some cases this will mean the development of new communities and "covenant" churches that attempt to live many aspects of life together in a Christian manner. My own community, The Sword of the Spirit, is one of a number of such efforts today.

In other cases it will mean creating Christian social environments, "spaces" for Christian life, within existing church institutions. These might be formal or informal groupings bringing people together for mutual encouragement, practical teaching, accountability, personal pastoral care, and brotherly and sisterly support.

In addition to providing the services they are designed for, church institutions typically foster networks of personal relationships that are supportive of individuals leading the Christian life. In the past, when religious institutions existed within the life of the Christian people, this dynamic was not much noted. But now that religious institutions stand isolated in a non-Christian culture, their potential for fostering social environments within themselves is worth careful consideration.

Pastoral leaders can capitalize on the environment-building potential of existing institutions. Religious education, Bible studies, worship, outreach, the teamwork of pastoral staffs-all can be designed to draw participants into greater love, commitment, and support.

This people-building approach would not mean a privatization of Christianity, a retreat from public life. It does not necessarily imply pessimism regarding particular efforts to infuse Christian values into public policy. But it does mean recognizing the simple necessity of doing whatever the Spirit leads us to do to restore a social base for Christian living. Without it, individual, institutional, and political efforts to put Christianity into practice will continue to be crippled.

FAITH AND HOPE

While harder, because unfamiliar, this approach offers cause for optimism. Pursuing the development of Peoplehood must involve a return to the sources of Christian life -personal faith in Christ, the power of the Spirit, the scriptural vision for Christians' relations to one another as members of one body. This approach would seize the historic opportunity to discover afresh the nature of Christian Peoplehood, free of many of the political and social entanglements that characterized the Christendom situation. The very shift of American society away from Christianity, deplorable as it is, opens the way for the bracing wind of the Spirit to blow anew, calling men and women to radical obedience and mutual commitment as fellow disciples.

The "mainstream" approach tends to be optimistic about transforming American society through political means, but pessimistic about individuals living according to the standards of a holy life. The "Peoplehood" approach focuses optimism-or, better, faith and hope-on Christ's power to liberate and transform individual persons, to join them together in covenant love, and to sustain them in holy living through corporate life in his body, the church.

The time has come to face head-on the accumulated effects of the West's rejection of God and his ways. Learning how to build up Christian Peoplehood in a secular, technological society constitutes a tremendous challenge. But the time is past when we can evade this challenge and concentrate solely on the kinds of institutional remedies that we feel comfortable with.

For centuries Christian leaders could busy themselves with running the institutions of the church, because the surrounding culture was a vehicle for the life of the Christian people. Now Christian leaders must face the difficult

task of fostering the development of the life of the Christian people within and around the churches' institutional structures. Otherwise we will find ourselves presiding over institutions filled with people whose lives are ever less Christian.

In the process we must avoid the pitfall of disconnection or antagonism between those taking initiatives to develop Christian Peoplehood and the official leaders of the churches. Those working for renewal must avoid an attitude of moral superiority or separatism and must see their efforts as a contribution to the whole life of the churches. Those in official leadership should foster rather than frustrate pastoral experiments, keeping communication open, finding ways to accommodate new configurations which do not fit into the established order or threaten established interests.

The Spirit distributes a variety of gifts. In response to the loss of Christian Peoplehood, He is giving inspiration and leadership here and there throughout the churches for restoring elements of Christian Peoplehood, building Christian social environments, developing models of covenant commitment and community life. Not everyone is called to work at this directly, but all can recognize its timeliness. Not every experiment will succeed, and none should be immune to correction. But throughout the churches we should welcome such attempts to respond to the prompting of the Spirit.

If we are to cooperate with the Lord of the church as he restores the Peoplehood of those who follow him, holy living will count for more than shrewd strategizing. Institutions are built by planning, but Christian Peoplehood grows through obedience to Christ and concrete expressions of commitment and care to one another. A willingness to suffer loss of advancement, prestige, and security, "filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church" (Col. 1:24), will inevitably be required of Christian leaders who seek to build Christian Peoplehood and a Christian way of life in a secularized society. Obviously, then, our efforts will humble us and teach us to rely on God, who is the only source of the holiness, obedience, love, perseverance, power, and wisdom that will be needed.

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