

Hospice Care for the Mainline

A response of Confessing Christians to the death of denominationalism

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Author's note: This paper was presented to a meeting of Confessing Presbyterian Church leaders meeting at the Southport Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, Ind., on June 23, 2003. An earlier version was presented to the Southeastern regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on March 17, 2001.

Introduction

A friend of mine died not long ago. Cecil spent his final days in the local hospice with his wife, Agnes, at his side. Some 20 years before, Agnes had played a key role in founding the facility. "I never dreamed I'd be in this situation," she remarked.

Many people, especially those of us whose faith in Christ was kindled and nurtured in mainline congregations, share Agnes' sentiments as they contemplate the time – now rapidly approaching – when their beloved ecclesiastical companions, the mainline Protestant denomination to which they belong, will cease to exist.

This unexpected situation gives rise to a crucial question: How should confessing Christians respond during denominationalism's terminal decline?

Should we demand heroic measures to forestall the inevitable for as long as is humanly possible? Should we participate in active euthanasia? Should we stand on the sidelines and cheer? Should we silently look the other way? Or is there yet another, perhaps more faithful, course of action?

As you may correctly assume from the title of this paper, I prefer the last option, a response that may be described in terms of "hospice care."

Overview

Part I of this paper will briefly survey the historical development and current terminal condition of modern mainline denominations, using as my main example the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part II will explore ways in which mainline denominationalism, a creature unique to the modern era, is succumbing to emerging trends in the postmodern world. Part III will suggest "hospice care" as an appropriate model for confessing Christians to follow during the last days of modern denominationalism. Part IV will consider the rise and criticism of Confessing Church Movements and suggest several positive consequences of this inevitable transition.

First, however, I would like to offer a definition and two disclaimers:

By way of definition, I am using the term "denominationalism" primarily to refer to the theory and practice of modern denominationalism as instantiated by mainline Protestant churches in 21st century America.

My first disclaimer is that, in discussing the death of denominationalism, I am not suggesting that every congregation in every mainline denomination is equally *in extremis*. Quite the contrary. Many mainline congregations are thriving – spiritually, missionally, numerically, financially. Such congregations will be, at most, only marginally affected once their denominations cease to exist. Dying denominations now siphon precious time, energy and

money from their most vital congregations. Once freed from such enervating demands, these congregations are likely to become even more vigorous and vibrant.

Second, and most emphatically, I am *not* advocating the elimination or abandonment of all mainline theological, confessional and ecclesiastical traditions. The historic Presbyterian emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the right relation of reason to revelation; the historic Methodist emphasis on sanctification and personal responsibility; the historic Episcopalian emphasis on liturgy and worship – these are gifts that must not be lost to the Church. Rather, these expansive, ever-fresh treasures must be transferred into vehicles suitable for conveying them to future generations of the people of God.

In other words, my proposal that confessing Christians provide hospice care to mainline denominations is not an exercise in *Schadenfreude*. Rather than taking delight in another's suffering, I maintain that there is much in mainline history and mission to be celebrated, much in mainline theological traditions to be preserved and, most important to my purpose in this paper, much constructive work for confessing Christians to do in preparing denominationalism's "survivors" to continue their faithful ministries in the absence of beloved institutional companions.

I. The modern mainline

A brief history

As Craig Van Gelder observes, "Denominations are the way most persons in North America encounter the institutional character of the church. This form of church is a fairly recent invention in church history, only about two centuries old."¹

He lists identifiable phases of denominational development, including: Purposive-Missionary (1800-1850), Churchly (1850-1900), Corporate (1900-1965) and Regulatory (1965-present),² and observes that underlying the formation of denominations was "the effort to rediscover the essential aspects of the New Testament church and the belief that the visible unity of the church needed to transcend theological and organizational differences."³

Van Gelder's characterization of the current phase of denominationalism as "Regulatory" is particularly apt. I have an 1843 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) hymnal with the denomination's *Book of Order* in the back. Its "Form of Government" takes up only 33 of the hymnal's 3x5 inch pages, while the "Directory for Worship" adds 25 more.

The denomination's current *Book of Order*, in a 6x9 inch format, has no page numbers, but looks to have at least 250 pages. Nearly a quarter of that space is taken up by a section that did not exist 160 years ago, the "Rules of Discipline," procedures by which some Presbyterians may take various kinds of action against other Presbyterians by dragging them through an ascending hierarchy of Presbyterian courts. It may say something about present-day Presbyterian priorities that this section is roughly twice as long as the current "Directory for Worship," which deals with such topics as Scripture and the sacraments.

Here Van Gelder's taxonomy is especially illuminating: A Purposive-Missionary denomination does not need 250 pages to state why it exists and how it will act. A Regulatory denomination will find that while 250 pages may suffice this year, next year will require at least 10 more pages for new mandates, with 10 more the next year and the next year and the next.

¹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 15.

² Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, p. 17.

³ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, p. 66.

Modern influences

Looking back over the past century, Darrell L. Guder, a Presbyterian minister and Princeton Theological Seminary professor, offers a concise summary of denominationalism's transition from missionary to regulatory:

"It is now clear, as we look back over the last 100 to 125 years, that the value systems and operating structures of the large American corporation have become the dominant model for the institutional church ... the Christian religion has become a big American business. We have centralized for efficiency and good management, developed major headquarters, accepted numerical and financial growth as the most important indications of success, introduced statistical measurement to determine that success, and made religion into a product."

He continues, "Marketing has become an essential function of religious management. Public relations and the canons of effective advertising define our activities. ... In many polities, [local congregations] tend to function as 'branch offices' of 'central headquarters.'"⁴

How different this is from Acts 2, where the members of the early church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42, 47). All too often, the modern mainline is devoted to political correctness and to market share, to fundraising and, above all, to institutional self-preservation. And their numbers are declining daily.

In short, modern mainline denominationalism has sold its ecclesiastical birthright for corporate, regulatory pottage. In the course of this unholy exchange, many in the mainline have focused so intently in being a denomination that they have lost a biblical and theological understanding of what it is to be the Church.

Theological confusion

Consider, as just one example of this theological dementia, the widespread confusion between the terms "congregation," "denomination," and "church."

The noun congregation comes from the verb congregate, which means to assemble, to gather together. Both the Old and New Testaments use the word "congregation" to describe a gathering of God's people. In the Church today, "congregation" identifies Christians who gather together.

A denomination comprises a collection of congregations. To denominate something is literally to give the name of the thing. That we have different denominations of the paper money in our wallets enables us to distinguish between the various bills and to choose the one that suits our purpose. Similarly, Protestant denominations are named in ways that distinguish them from other Protestant denominations; the names denominate their differences. Simply listing a few denominations – Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregational, Seventh Day Adventist, American Baptist – highlights salient differences between them. Perhaps not surprisingly, the word "denomination" is not found in Scripture.

The word "church" is. The New Testament uses the word "church," *ekklesia*, to identify either a local gathering of believers or all the saints throughout all time and in all places. *Ekklesia* combines the verb *kaleo*, to call, with the prefix *ek*, meaning out of, or from, to designate "those who are called out." Rather than continuing to use *synagogue*, the name for the Jewish communities and the buildings in which they met, the earliest Christians chose the word *ekklesia*,

⁴ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 196.

which properly may be translated “church” or “congregation,” to identify themselves as the people of God. *Ekklesia* was as Kevin Giles has noted, “a word with theological potential.”⁵

This brief consideration of these three words helps us see that modern denominationalism, while not incompatible with Scripture, is certainly without biblical mandate. And, given the meanings of these words, I believe it is biblically and theologically inaccurate to speak of the Presbyterian *Church* or the United Methodist *Church* or the Episcopal *Church*. More precisely, we ought to speak of the Presbyterian, Methodist or Episcopal *denomination*.

Such linguistic precision would offer immediate theological and ecclesiological benefits. More than once I have heard well-meaning Presbyterians say, “It is a sin to leave the church.” By this, they appear to mean that it offends the holiness of Almighty God when an individual leaves a congregation affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in order to join a congregation affiliated with another denomination.

Reflecting on the definitions of “congregation,” “denomination,” and “church” will help us see that “leaving the church” is not a sin but an oxymoron. The Church is the community of faith called out by God. One may leave a congregation or denomination for any number of good or bad reasons. That is because membership in any particular congregation or denomination is voluntary, like membership in the Rotary or the Republican Party.

In contrast, Church membership, at least from the Reformed perspective, is not a matter of human choice but of divine election. An individual may change congregations or denominations, but by definition, in so doing, no Christian ever ceases to be a member of the Church.

Becoming more intentional about the way we use the words “denomination,” “congregation” and “church,” could help confessing Christians to recover a more biblical understanding of the Church, to avoid delusions of denominational grandeur, and to see denominationalism’s demise not as the death of the Church, but as the trading in of an old vehicle, one that has outlived its usefulness, for a vehicle better suited to its times and its tasks.

The present situation

Unfortunately, for many in the mainline, evangelicals and liberals alike, the words “denomination” and “church” have become synonymous. For example, the lead story in the January/February 2003 issue of *Theology Matters* is by a well known PCUSA evangelical. The article is titled, “The State of the Church.” It begins “Since we last met, the Church has defeated Amendment A. The Church has spoken.”⁶

With all due respect to my evangelical friend: No, the Church has not spoken. One denomination has spoken. The state of one denomination was all he was addressing.

This is just one example. It would not be too much of a stretch to say that many in the modern mainline, evangelical and liberal alike, are so devoted to the present shape and form of their own denomination that they are engaged in nothing less than institutional idolatry. For such as these, it does not matter what a minister or member believes about the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ or the authority of Scripture – as long as he believes that his denomination must survive in its current form at all costs.

This tendency is exemplified in a review in the *Presbyterian Outlook* of Ephraim Radner’s *The End of the Church*. With breathtaking hubris, the reviewer, a Presbyterian minister, declares *ex cathedra*, “There is no truth worth listening to on either side of the debates currently raging in

⁵ Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?: A biblical and theological inquiry* (London: SPCK, 1995), p. 25.

⁶ Jerry Andrews, “The State of the Church,” *Theology Matters*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Jan/Feb 2003, p. 1.

our denomination that is not committed to the future of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a church of Jesus Christ.”⁷

From this perspective, institutional loyalty is the cardinal virtue, institutional survival the greatest good. Ironically, sacrificing biblical theology on the altar of institutional maintenance does not preserve the institution, but accelerates its demise. God abhors idolatry, even, perhaps especially, when the idol is an ecclesiastical institution. And Presbyterians are not the only ones indulging in institutional idolatry.

Looking beyond our own denomination, it seems to me that the Episcopal Church is perhaps the mainline denomination closest to formal division. In at least two Episcopal dioceses, bishops will not accept priests who hold to the historic teachings of Scripture and the Church about the sinfulness of homosexual behavior. In an action that Episcopal officials deem “irregular,” two American priests have been consecrated bishops by archbishops from other countries for the purpose of providing episcopal oversight to orthodox Episcopalians in this country. Several sets of discussions deemed “schismatic” are ongoing.

In early 2001, a meeting of worldwide Anglican archbishops was held in Hendersonville, North Carolina. While evangelical Episcopalians had hoped that their spiritual leaders would address their denomination’s departure from Anglican theology and practice, the primates all but ignored these concerns in their public statements, which one commentator labeled “a theological puff piece of gigantic proportions.”⁸

More recently, Episcopalians in the Diocese of New Hampshire elected “the first openly gay bishop anywhere in the worldwide Anglican communion.”⁹ The election, which must be confirmed by the denomination’s General Convention this summer, highlights the deep divisions within institutional Episcopalianism. As a conservative Episcopal organization commented, the election of this bishop, “who left his wife and children to pursue a homosexual relationship, is a clear illustration of the deep dysfunction in our ‘anything goes’ Episcopal Church, and is a witness that is not consistent with the global Anglican Christian Church.”¹⁰

The United Methodist Church is facing similar divisions. In 2000, a minister was defrocked for violating the Methodist *Book of Discipline* by marrying two homosexual men. Other ministers, however, have publicly pledged to conduct similar services, and a small but vocal group of Methodist congregations remains actively oppose their denomination’s regulations on this subject.

In June, 2003 the denomination’s Northern Illinois Annual Conference approved a resolution stating that homosexuality and bisexuality are gifts from God. Of the 24 delegates the conference elected to serve in higher governing bodies, 20 signed a statement approving homosexual behavior and “opposing pressure from conservative renewal groups to make the denomination a ‘creedal’ church,”¹¹ a direct assault on the United Methodist Confessing Church Movement.

Even overtly evangelical institutions are facing similar tensions. According to some observers, the Presbyterian Church in America – struggling with issues including the interpretation of Genesis 1 and the propriety of a woman speaking from the pulpit – soon may

⁷ Thomas W. Currie, III, “*The End of the Church*: How it applies to the PC(USA),” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 8, 2001, p. .

⁸ David W. Virtue, “It’s Official. Nothing Happened,” www.prayerbook.ca/kanu0036.htm, posted March 10, 2001.

⁹ Laurie Goodstein, “New Hampshire Episcopalians Choose Gay Bishop, and Conflict,” www.nytimes.com/2003/06/08/national/08BISH.html.

¹⁰ “AAC Responds to the Election of the Episcopal Church’s First Openly Homosexual Bishop,” www.AmericanAnglican.org/News/News.cfm?ID=605&c=21.

¹¹ www.umns.umc.org/acreports/reports/NorthernIllinois.htm.

split. And Southern Baptist associations in places like Texas and Atlanta are openly debating acceptable parameters for ongoing affiliation.

Much of the dysfunction in the mainline and beyond reflects the disruptions being caused as the society in which we are located, from which we draw our members and to which we witness, shifts from a modern to a postmodern worldview. And it is to that shift that we now turn our attention.

II. The postmodern church

Those who have tried to understand postmodernism and its implications will, I suspect, concur with Anthony C. Thiselton's observation that "It is impossible either to define or to evaluate postmodernity as a uniform or even single phenomenon."¹² Recognizing this reality, I will approach postmodernity obliquely, looking at three emerging trends in the postmodern church: the end of the Christendom Paradigm, the emergence of new apostolic networks, and the move from a membership to a discipleship model of the congregation. I will end this section by briefly addressing one concrete consequence of denominationalism's postmodern predicament.

1. *The end of the Christendom Paradigm*

In his influential book *The Once and Future Church*, Loren Mead, an Episcopal priest, says that, for its first three centuries, the church operated under the Apostolic Paradigm. The church was the community of those who had been called out from the world in order to be sent (*apostellein*) into the world as Jesus' witnesses.

Mead writes that, on the other side of this community, was "a world environment that was hostile to what the church stood for. The world was not neutral. It was opposed to the community. Each group of Christians was an illicit community, proscribed by the laws of the land. In many places, it was a capital offense to consort with or be a Christian."¹³

With the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in A.D. 313, what Mead calls the Christendom Paradigm began to emerge. The critical difference between the Apostolic and Christendom Paradigms is that "the world that immediately surrounded the church was legally identified with the church. There was now no separation between world and church within the Empire. The law removed the hostility from the environment but also made the environment and the church identical."¹⁴

This paradigm persisted well into the 20th century. Now it is crumbling and, Mead writes, "The crisis for congregations, Christians, and those who care about the Gospel is that the outlines of the new paradigm are not yet clear. Tested landmarks have disappeared, but we still lack enough clarity to know what new landmarks we need, much less how to find or fashion them."¹⁵

In the decade since Mead's work was published, some of those forms and landmarks have started coming into view. These include the formation of new apostolic networks and the move from a membership to a discipleship model of the congregation.

¹² Anthony C. Thiselton, "Postmodernity," in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), p. 416.

¹³ Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Encounter* (Bethesda, Md.: The Alban Institute, 1991), p. 11.

¹⁴ Mead, *The Once and Future Church*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Mead, *The Once and Future Church*, p. 25.

2. *The emergence of new apostolic networks*

Episcopal priest and Fuller Seminary professor Eddie Gibbs notes that, “C. Peter Wagner has had the insight to identify a new emerging-church paradigm and the foresight to appreciate the potential significance of ‘new apostolic networks.’ ... His first attempt at assigning a name to these emerging churches was to refer to them as ‘post denominational,’ but this was abandoned because a number of the churches he identified as fitting the profile were within traditional denominations,”¹⁶ an observation that should not be lost on confessing Christians within the mainline.

Wagner defines the major difference between modern denominationalism and the new apostolic networks in the following terms: “We are seeing a transition from bureaucratic authority to personal authority, from control to coordination and from national leadership to charismatic leadership.”¹⁷ This move toward apostolic networks recognizes two important trends in the postmodern world.

The first is that society itself is becoming increasingly pluralistic. Gibbs notes that “Whereas hierarchies can operate in societies that are homogenous and centralized, they begin to fall apart when societies become pluralistic and each segment develops its own agenda. In reaction to such diversification, repressive regimes might be superimposed which will bring a semblance of social order for a time, but they are doomed to crumble in the long run.”¹⁸ As an example, Gibbs cites the fall of Marxist governments in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. Equally he could have looked at Regulatory mainline denominations today, where the same dynamic is hard at work.

Second, in contrast to hierarchical denominationalism, apostolic networks operate in ways very similar to, but not identical with, the functioning of the early church under Mead’s Apostolic Paradigm. The surrounding society is seen as a mission field. Individuals and organizations respond to God’s call by using the gifts God has given them to meet immediate mission opportunities. No denominational headquarters is needed, or wanted, to create strategy or authorize tactics.

The emergence of apostolic networks will eventually eliminate one of the most unpleasant features of the modern mainline: nasty battles, increasingly fought in secular courts, over whether the denomination or the congregation owns the local church property. As Leith Anderson writes, “as long as the network meets our needs, we continue the association, knowing that we are free to leave at any time. ... Networks tend to be loose in organization, simple in structure, highly flexible and comparatively temporary.”¹⁹

Given the inherent freedom and flexibility of a network, it is certainly possible that individual churches or even entire networks may stray beyond the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. Then again, history and hierarchy have not prevented mainline congregations, and even entire denominations, from barreling headlong into heresy. The key to the emergence of new apostolic networks is that, by their very design, they realize what the modern mainline does not: that the form of the Church must serve its function. The mainline’s failure to learn this lesson is yet another factor in its imminent demise.

¹⁶ Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 74.

¹⁷ C. Peter Wagner, *The New Apostolic Churches* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1998), p. 20.

¹⁸ Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁹ Leith Anderson, *A Church for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992), pp. 47-49.

3. The move from membership to discipleship

Michael W. Foss, a Lutheran pastor, identifies another important paradigm shift in the postmodern church: rethinking of the very concept of church membership, specifically moving from a membership model to a discipleship model of the local congregation.

With Mead and Gibbs, Foss recognizes that “times have changed. The church and its clergy have lost their privileged positions at the center of community life. ... The changing cultural context, with its displacement of Christianity from the center of individual and community life to the periphery, has caused a mutation in the membership model of the church. In the Protestant explosion of the 1950s, membership implied obligation. [Today] membership has come to imply prerogatives.”²⁰

To say the least. In the words of a friend of mine, a presbytery executive, the current life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) largely revolves around the question of “who may shall whom.” As in society at large, so in the mainline, rights have replaced responsibilities. Everyone wants a seat at the table. No one wants to kneel down with a towel and basin.

The apostle John, writing about the Last Supper, tells us that Jesus:

got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” ... “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” (John 13:4-7, 13-17)

The marks of discipleship, Foss says, “are not institutionally driven,” but are characterized by daily prayer, weekly worship, Bible reading, service, spiritual friendships and giving. In sum, “Membership is about getting; discipleship is about giving. Membership is about dues; discipleship is about stewardship. Membership is about belonging to a select group with its privileges and prerogatives; discipleship is about changing and shaping lives by the grace of God.”²¹

Mired in a membership model, the mainline has largely lost sight of its commission to go and make disciples of all nations. That is yet another reason why denominationalism will not survive the transition to postmodernity.

Denominationalism's postmodern predicament

As James W. Sire observes, “postmodernism is both more than and less than a worldview.” He cites French sociologist Jean-François Lyotard, who defined postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” meaning that “no longer is there a single story, a metanarrative (in our terms a worldview), that holds Western culture together.”²²

²⁰ Michael W. Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), pp. 14-15.

²¹ Foss, *Power Surge*, p. 21.

²² James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door, A Basic Worldview Catalog*, third edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 174.

While terms like “postmodernism” and “metanarratives” may seem abstract to many in our pews and even some in our pulpits, “incredulity toward metanarratives” is having a major impact on mainline decline. In previous generations, those who were born Presbyterian were likely to remain Presbyterian throughout their lives. One’s familial and denominational heritage, both “metanarratives” in postmodern terminology, were often closely intertwined.

Today that situation has largely been reversed. Most Presbyterians have come to their current congregations by way of another denomination. Families change from Presbyterian to Methodist as casually as from Ford to Chevrolet, and for similar reasons: a little different styling, a bit more pep under the hood, a closer dealership. Denominationalism’s postmodern predicament is that metanarratives *have* lost their meaning, even among those who have never heard of the word.

Called to be Christ’s disciples and his witnesses during the societal shift from modernity to postmodernity, Christians in the first half of the twenty-first century are living at a time of extraordinary transition in the life of the Church. The institutional church is moving (perhaps more accurately, being moved) out of its privileged position as chaplain to the empire back toward Mead’s Apostolic Paradigm, an existence on the margins of society, perhaps even to the point of being actively persecuted by political powers.

To return to the question I asked at the outset: How should confessing Christians – both within and without mainline denominations – respond during denominationalism’s terminal decline? I believe confessing Christians can best respond by following a model of providing hospice care.

III. Hospice care

The hospice in which my friend Cecil spent his final days is a Christian ministry, started by the First Presbyterian Church of Lenoir, N.C., which I now serve as parish associate. Despite recent pressure to change its mission statement to eliminate its specifically Christian commitments, it has stood firm and continues to insist that its work of caring for the dying and for their families is undertaken as a distinctively Christian response to God’s gracious love.

Within mainline denominations are individuals, myself among them, who work with what are broadly termed “renewal movements,” but which could be seen as apostolic networks. In the tradition of Martin Luther, these organizations, some of which have been at work for more than 30 years, never sought to establish new ecclesiastical institutions, only to “re-form” existing ones.

While the efforts of renewal groups to restore their respective denominations to biblical standards are laudable, I believe they should no longer emphasize revitalizing existing institutions. Rather, they should begin to see their work as one small part of a larger endeavor – aiding the transition from the old forms to the new.

To shift for a moment from a medical to a military metaphor: The task of providing hospice care for the modern mainline may be compared to that of an Army unit fighting a rearguard action at the end of a losing battle: the stand taken by the few allows the bulk of the surviving forces to withdraw and regroup.

For the last two decades, renewal groups within the mainline have supplied many, perhaps most, of the troops actually engaging in the battle. Confessing Christians outside the mainline have provided vital logistical and spiritual support. But as we move into the third Christian

millennium, those now willing to provide hospice care for the mainline will blaze the trail for Christian ministry in postmodern society.

The war to sustain the modern mainline in anything even remotely resembling its current form has been lost. Battles remain to be fought, but the outcome is inevitable. To shift back to the medical metaphor, the patient is terminal. Death is near. But from denominationalism's protracted and painful demise, new life will emerge.

When it does, the Church will have entered an unprecedented era, a time of theological vigor unparalleled since the Reformation, a time of mission outreach to its immediate surroundings unmatched since the reign of Constantine.

In the meantime, confessing Christians can play a significant role in the terminal stages of mainline denominationalism by performing three specific services that characterize hospice care: first, providing pastoral care; second, preparing survivors for life after the death of their beloved denomination; and finally, offering palliative care to relieve the pain.

1. Providing pastoral care

Our churches do not withdraw pastoral care from a parishioner just because he or she has been diagnosed as terminal. Indeed, it is at such times that individuals and their families are most in need of Christian witness in both word and deed.

So it is with the modern mainline.

Confessing Christians, particularly evangelical pastors, ought not abandon mainline denominations just because those denominations are terminal. Now, more than at any time in their history, members of mainline denominations need to hear the good news of the gospel proclaimed clearly and with great compassion. They need to be reminded that they are loved by God and have been called by God to be his witnesses, that is, that they are members of the body of Christ with valuable functions to fulfill.

Confessing Christians who have been called to serve God within the modern mainline are in a situation is not unlike that of Ezekiel, who heard God say:

"You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel – not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate. But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. And he said to me, 'Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you.'" (Ezekiel 3:4-10)

Combining the prophetic and priestly vocations, confessing Christians within the mainline must take to heart all God's words. We must proclaim them with courage and compassion, neither denying the pain of those who are suffering nor offering them false hope, but speaking God's word to God's people, representing God to the people and representing the people to God.

2. Preparing survivors

A second service confessing Christians can offer the mainline is preparing those who will be "survivors" to face the imminent demise of their denomination. "You can't really be a hospice patient until you realize you are dying," says Dr. Robert Belk, Medical Director of the Caldwell

County Hospice in Lenoir, N.C. “The patient usually gets there before the family. It’s up to us [the hospice staff and volunteers] to help the patient’s family.”²³

One model Confessing Christians in mainline denominations may find useful in helping the family face the reality is offered by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. In her seminal work *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross identified five stages through which terminally ill patients progress. Making the appropriate adjustments, and recognizing that not every individual or group goes through every stage or goes through each in order, these stages finds their parallels in both the families of terminally ill patients and in the dying mainline’s membership. Again, I’ll draw most of my examples from my own denomination.

The first stage Kübler-Ross identifies is Denial and Isolation. This is perhaps the phase in which most mainline members find themselves. Many members of mainline congregations pay little if any attention to denominational affairs. (A fact that is itself another sign of the mainline’s terminal decline.) Whether they are protected from denominational news by their pastors or simply lack the inclination to concern themselves with the activities of higher governing bodies, these individuals tend to deny that there are any problems with their denominations. After all, their congregation is doing just fine, so what could possibly have gone wrong up the line.

The second stage is Anger. A friend of mine works as a nurse in an intensive care unit. She describes a phenomenon she calls a “meltdown,” which occurs when the family of an ICU patient suddenly realizes that their loved one is too badly injured or too ill to survive. The ICU doctors and nurses, the very ones providing care, often bear the brunt of the families’ rage. In the PCUSA, anger characterizes both ends of the theological spectrum.

In a newsletter several years ago, one liberal organization encouraged its members toward denominational involvement by urging them to “Nurture your anger.” That advice that squares badly with Paul’s admonition to the Ephesians “‘In your anger do not sin:’ Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Eph. 4:26-27). On the conservative side, the self-named Radical Right Wing of the Confessing Church Movement seems driven by its anger over the imminent demise of the denomination, and expresses this anger by lashing out with equal vigor at both liberals and other confessing Christians who do not share its view of the need for the survival of the current institution.

Kübler-Ross’ third stage is Bargaining. Again, this stage has practitioners on both sides of the PCUSA’s theological divide. The Covenant Network and Presbyterians for Renewal are ultimately utterly devoted to maintaining the current denomination in substantially its current form. They are willing to bargain with denominational leaders, General Assembly commissioners, and even behind closed doors with each other to maintain the existence of the PCUSA.

Depression is the fourth stage. Exact numbers would be hard to come by, but I suspect that many in the mainline have reached this stage. They have tried to revitalize their denomination and have failed. Their failure has left the physically, mentally, and spiritually exhausted. In clinical terms, they are depressed. But having reached this stage, they are now at the point where they can move on.

The fifth and final stage Kübler-Ross’ identifies is Acceptance. I would be so bold as to place in this category such groups as the Confessing Presbyterian Churches. Those who have accepted the inevitable demise of their denomination are thereby freed to look beyond their own parochial interests and to see that God’s Church is alive and well. This freedom in turn allows them to see where God’s Holy Spirit is at work and to come alongside and join in God’s work.

²³ Interview, Sept. 20, 2001.

3. *Offering palliative care*

The third service confessing Christians offering hospice care to the mainline can offer is helping to provide palliative care. Death is often painful. An important facet of hospice care is known as palliative care, that is, acknowledging the pain of the terminally ill and providing appropriate analgesics. Many in the mainline are suffering through the death throes of their beloved denominations. Confessing Christians can do at least four things to ease that pain.

First, acknowledge the pain. In my initial draft of this paper, I badly underestimated the importance of this step. Many who realize that their denomination is dying are deeply wounded by its impending demise. They are hurt by the fact that it is happening, angered that their efforts to reverse the decline have been unsuccessful, and already grieving for their loss. Confessing Christians need to acknowledge the existence and the depth of that pain.

To reiterate a theme I touched on at the outset, we must not, and must not be perceived to be, taking delight in the pain being caused by the terminal condition of mainline denominationalism. Without lapsing into mawkish sentimentality, we must show genuine sympathy, perhaps even empathy, for the pain people are feeling at denominationalism's demise. For only when we have acknowledged their pain will most people let us help them move past it.

Second, to ease the pain we can celebrate the history of our dearly departing denomination. If you will forgive the immodesty, Presbyterians have a glorious history. We have a wonderful record of world mission; of establishing schools and hospitals; of ministering to individuals who have taken places of leadership not only in the larger church, but also in government and industry. Although of late we have lost some of that luster, in the passing of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) we still may celebrate more than two centuries of faithful service, even through the tears that acknowledge our sorrow at our loss.

Third, to ease the pain of the impending loss, we can work to preserve the high points of our heritage. Presbyterians have a godly heritage. We trace our ancestry through John Knox to John Calvin. It has been our particular gift to do theological work in a systematic way that benefits the body of Christ. While our polity, with its sharing of work between ministers, elders and deacons, is not the only faithful way of being the church, it is, in my humble opinion, a model of local church governance that commends itself highly to a postmodern age.

Finally, we can look for ways to equip mainline members for future mission. Presbyterians are congenitally inclined toward doing all things decently and in order. We work with often agonizing slowness through an ascending series of sessions, presbyteries and synods, committees and commissions. Such hierarchical models will not work well, if indeed they work at all, in the future. We will need retraining in how to be the church in a postmodern world. We will need continued training in Scripture, theology and church history. The Great Commission has not been repealed. But we will need to learn how to fulfill it in new ways.

Earlier I quoted Van Gelder's comment that the impetus underlying denominationalism was "the effort to rediscover the essential aspects of the New Testament church and the belief that the visible unity of the church needed to transcend theological and organizational differences."²⁴

Those connectional instincts remain sound. They simply need to be redirected. Even if confessing Christians could regain complete control of their respective denominational apparatus, and I do not believe that this is possible, such an outcome would be undesirable. It would be like spending all the family's savings and taking out a second mortgage on the house to buy a buggy whip factory on the very day that Henry Ford started selling the cars that were rolling off his assembly line: The operation might be profitable for a year or two, but the investment would never be recovered.

²⁴ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, p. 66.

Mainline denominationalism is a creature of modernity. As such, it is singularly unsuited to the emerging postmodern age. What will take its place? Many things, I suspect. But one area in which God's blessings already seem evident is the rise of Confessing Church Movements.

IV. The rise of confessing church movements

Singing with the choir from the balcony, I spotted only a few empty seats at Cecil's funeral. In the best of Presbyterian tradition, we gathered on that Sunday afternoon in a Service of Witness to the Resurrection. The heartache from the loss of husband, father, grandfather and friend was not dismissed or downplayed – but it was not central.

Instead, the service celebrated Cecil's risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, rejoiced in Cecil's presence with his Lord, and looked forward to the day when we would once again be united in the presence of God. With the apostle Paul, we remembered that:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies ... (I Cor. 15:36)

Eddie Gibbs observes that, "The present cultural upheaval from modernity to postmodernity, however the latter term is defined, will necessitate not merely structural re-engineering of denominations but their death and resurrection."²⁵

The death of modern denominationalism must not be thought of in terms of an ultimate demise, but as the essential precondition for resurrection.

How long will this transition take? How long will the mainline linger? Quantum physicist Neils Bohr has been quoted as saying that "prediction is a very difficult art, especially when it involves the future."

My own sense is that we seem to be in a series of roughly 40-year cycles. Van Gelder dates the Regulatory denomination to the mid-1960s, which I think accurate. Forty years before that came the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, with its battle cry "Doctrine divides, mission unites." As denominations began using bureaucratic structure to replace theological coherence, "mission" was determined by "superiors" in headquarters and marching orders were sent down to the congregations.

Sadly, it took decades for many mainline Christians to realize what Robert Thorton Henderson, a retired Presbyterian pastor, has so precisely summarized: "A 'denomination' is actually the aggregate of congregations consenting to be accountable to each other in theology and mission. This is good and helpful. But if the *consensus* is absent, then there may still be the same number of congregations, but there is no reason for the denominations."²⁶

In abandoning efforts to achieve theological agreement, mainline denominations unintentionally dissolved the glue that held their congregations together in common mission. Lacking both theological and missional consensus, corporate denominationalism dissolved and regulatory denominationalism is now yielding to ecclesiastical antinomianism.

I suspect that by the middle of this century, new forms, including apostolic networks of congregations and parachurch ministries and a renewed emphasis on discipleship, may be largely in place. By then, some enterprising church historian in search of a Ph.D. will have given a catchy name to the ecclesiastical era you and I are entering.

²⁵ Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, p. 66.

²⁶ Robert Thorton Henderson, *Blueprint 21: Presbyterians in the Post-Denominational Era* (Franklin, Tenn.: Providence House, 2000), p. 2.

Admittedly, this may take far less than 40 years. But confessing Christians within mainline denominations seem particularly prone to underestimate institutional inertia. Denominational headquarters are defended by entrenched bureaucrats who occupy well-fortified positions. Endowments at the national level alone are measured in the billions of dollars. I believe this powerful combination of bureaucrats and billions can keep the status quo in place for decades.

But here, mercifully, my hospice care analogy breaks down. An individual human being must die before God can raise him to new life. Not so an institution. Signs of new ecclesiastical life already are emerging amid the decay of denominationalism. Confessing movements comprising faithful individuals congregations who are committed to the authority of Scripture and the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy, even now are connecting to each other and reaching out in common mission.

The Confessing Church in the PCUSA

Such movements are not new in the history of the Church. The most ecumenical confession in the Church today, the Nicene Creed, emerged from an intramural theological controversy. Athanasius stood firm on the deity of Christ, and the Church continues to affirm that Jesus is “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

In the last century, Adolph Hitler created a national German Protestant Church. In Edward Dowey’s words, this institution effectively harmonized “throne and altar, fatherland and church, gospel and patriotism, Christian hope and national destiny.” As a result, the church in Germany largely lost its “critical perspective and prophetic power. The gospel was absorbed in the culture. The salt lost its savor, and the leaven its power to change the lump. The distortion of cross into swastika, which seemed obvious to wise men from afar, was clear in Germany to relatively few.”²⁷

Some who discerned this transformation from within gathered in May, 1934 and unanimously approved the Barmen Declaration, which cited “errors of the ‘German Christians’ ... which are devastating the Church.” They confessed six “evangelical truths.” Each confession was followed by the articulation and rejection of a “false doctrine” being promoted by the politicized leadership of the German Protestant Church.

And in March, 2001, in western Pennsylvania, the session of the Summit Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) affirmed three historic Christian truths: the sole sufficiency of Christ, the infallibility of Scripture and the need for personal holiness. Within six months, more than 800 other sessions issued similar statements. Youth groups and a Presbyterian-related college soon issued such affirmations as well. The Confessing Church Movement in the PCUSA was beginning to take shape.

Criticism came quickly.

Confessing movement criticized

In June 2001, Jack Rogers was elected moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly. Asked for his response to the Confessing Church Movement, Rogers told the assembly that elected him to the denomination’s highest office “I’m very grieved by this movement ... I think we need to take it very seriously as a threat to the peace, unity and purity of

²⁷ Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *A Commentary on the Confession of 1967 and an Introduction to “The Book of Confessions”* (Philadelphia: Westminster, n.d.) p. 252.

the church.”²⁸ Strident criticism of the Confessing Church Movement became a hallmark of Rogers’ moderatorial year.

In February 2002, while the Confessing Church Movement was holding its first National Celebration in Atlanta, the Permanent Judicial Commission of Central Florida Presbytery issued an astonishing ruling. One of the presbytery’s smaller congregations had adopted a statement similar to Summit’s. An elder from a nearby congregation filed suit, alleging that the statement was unconstitutional. The commission agreed, and ordered the session to rescind its statement that Jesus alone is Lord, that the Bible is God’s word, and that God’s people are called to holy living.

The decision was overturned on appeal. However, the fact that a presbytery commission would order a congregation’s leaders not to confess such foundational doctrines of historic Christian orthodoxy is irrefutable evidence of a denomination in terminal decline.

More nuanced, criticism comes from Ted Wardlaw, who was recently installed as president of Presbyterian-related Austin Theological Seminary. While never directly mentioning the Confessing Church Movement, Wardlaw appears to have them in mind when he says:

“Some of our conversations these days about boiling down the larger church into a loose association of congregations worries me because they [are] giving us the impression that the church is just a society of like-minded individuals. Is this really enough? In this kind of church polity, am I as apt to be able to hear the correcting voice of a greater church, a larger church, beyond my cul-de-sac of fellow believers when I am wrong? Am I able to hear that voice, the voice of a larger church, confirming me when I am right?”²⁹

In criticizing such “loose associations,” President Wardlaw seems conveniently unaware of just how deeply the PCUSA is embedded in its own cul-de-sac, notably in its headlong rush to ordain those who engage in sexual behaviors that the Bible says are sinful and its resolute refusal to proclaim Jesus the way, the truth and the life for all people and that no one come to God the Father except through him (see John 14:6). The fact that the PCUSA is a denomination and not a loose association has not prevented it from isolating itself on these issues from the overwhelming majority of the Church around the world. It is hard to see how networks of confessing congregations could do any worse in this arena than has our own denomination.

Saying the same word

Having dealt with the nature of the Church and denominationalism and traced the rise of the Confessing Church Movement in our own denomination, I’d like to conclude with a brief consideration of what it means for us as individuals, congregations and networks to “confess.”

The Greek word translated “confess” and “acknowledge” is *homologeō*. Literally translated, to confess is “to say the same word.” In secular Greek, *homologeō* was used in the sense of “to agree to the statement, to accept the affirmation.” In Scripture, the term took on a technical, theological meaning, and was used both in reference to confessing sins to God and confessing faith in God.

Of course, we are able to confess our faith in God, to say the same word about him that he has said about himself, only because God has first revealed himself to us; through his acts in history, his words in Holy Scripture and, supremely, in Jesus Christ. The priority of God’s self-revelation means that our confessing is our response to God’s gracious gift of saving faith. It also

²⁸ Robert P. Mills, “New Moderator Blasts Confessing Movement,” *The Presbyterian Layman*, Vol. 34/No. 5, p. 10.

²⁹ Ted Wardlaw, “God’s Call and the Church’s Voice,” *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, Spring 2003, Vol. 118/No. 2, p. 15.

means that while our confessions may be intensely personal, they are never purely private. To be a confessing Christian is to gather with other confessing Christians. And these gatherings – the networks, associations, affiliations – increasingly seem to be forms of being the Church together that God is blessing as the Church seeks to bear faithful witness in a postmodern world.

These new forms cannot achieve their full stature while modern mainline denominations exist in their present form any more than saplings can thrive when overshadowed in old-growth forests.

But their day is dawning. Modern mainline denominationalism is dying. Nevertheless, the Church of Jesus Christ is alive and well. You and I are privileged to be God's children, Christ's disciples, Spirit-empowered confessors of Christ to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth at an epochal turning point in the history of the Church.

May God keep us faithful in confessing the words he has revealed.

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