

Presbyterians and American Culture: The Case of the Twentieth Century*

Bradley J. Longfield

Reformed Institute, January 24, 2015

I want to thank the Board of the Reformed Institute and the Executive Director, Dr. Bruce Douglass, for the invitation to speak with you this morning. My talk this morning draws largely on my recent book *Presbyterians and American Culture* with a particular focus on the twentieth century.¹ I am delighted to be here and look forward to our conversation.

Presbyterians, as educated members of the dominant cultural tradition in this nation, have played a major role in American history. They have, as part of their religious tradition, sought to “transform culture” but they have also been deeply influenced by the culture. At times, the influence of the church on the culture has been stronger; and at other times the influence of the culture on the church is more pronounced. This is not to say that values rooted in Christian convictions and those derived from non-Christian sources are always opposed. They can overlap. But they can also be starkly different.

Recent observers of the Presbyterian Church have argued that the church of late has accommodated itself to the culture to such a degree that it has difficulty articulating a clear identity. Darrell Guder of Princeton Seminary, for example, has claimed that, “On the one hand, the churches of North America have been dislocated from their prior role of chaplain to the culture and society and have lost their once privileged position of influence At the same time, the churches have become so accommodated to the American way of life that they are now domesticated, and it is no longer obvious

¹ See Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). Some of the sentences are the same.

*© 2015 Bradley J. Longfield - Any duplication or transmission of this essay by any means without the written permission of the author is strictly prohibited.

what justifies their existence as particular communities.”² Likewise, James Davison Hunter, of the University of Virginia has argued:

Courtship and marriage, the formation and education of children, the mutual relationships and obligations between the individual and community, vocation, leadership, consumption, leisure, “retirement” and the use of time in the final chapters of life—on these and other matters Christianity has uncritically assimilated to the dominant ways of life in a manner dubious at the least.³

Now teasing apart what is particularly Christian and what is American in the church is not an easy thing. These influences are never completely unalloyed and we can always confuse the Christian faith with the values of the era in which we live. But history can help us in this task. So this morning I want to step back from our current situation, to look at the history of Presbyterians in the past century, to gain some perspective on how we came to this place.

Henry Adams, at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote that “in essentials like religion, ethics, philosophy; in history, literature and art; in the concepts of all science except perhaps mathematics, the American boy of 1854 stood nearer the year 1 than to the year 1900.”⁴ The intellectual developments that he was addressing included Darwinism, which challenged the biblical account of creation and denied God’s providential design of the universe; the advent of historical criticism of the Bible which questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the authorship of Isaiah, and the accuracy of the Gospels; and the rise of the social sciences such as psychology, anthropology, and comparative religions which questioned the notion of absolute truth, seeing all truth claims as historically and culturally conditioned. Additionally, changes in communication and transportation contributed to urbanization and made America the leading industrial nation in the world by 1900. All of this encouraged secularization of large swaths of American culture, particularly higher education.

²Darrell Guder, *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 78.

³James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 185.

⁴ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Cambridge: Riverside, 1918; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), 53. This section follows Bradley Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 19ff. and Longfield in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. “Liberalism/Modernism, Protestant”.

One response to many of these trends was the rise of theological liberalism or modernism. This movement sought to address the new intellectual developments by accommodating the traditional faith to modern culture.

Henry Sloane Coffin (1877-1954), who would become president of Union Seminary in New York, exemplifies the emphases of theological liberalism in the era.⁵ Coffin was a New York native, educated at Yale, Edinburgh, Marburg, and Union (New York). He became a pastor in New York and a leader among liberal Presbyterians. He insisted on:

- 1) The need for adaptation if Christianity was to thrive in modern culture. Creeds were “man’s attempt in the best thought and language at his command to express his religious experience” and every period “must revise and say in its own words what God means to it.”
- 2) Immanence of God: God was present in and revealed through the progress of history.
- 3) An Optimistic view of History and Humanity: “Each age is surpassing its predecessor in standards of duty, [and] its conceptions of man’s obligations to man.”
- 4) The Importance of Religious Experience: Following the lead of Schleiermacher and other European liberals, experience and feeling were seen as the core of the faith. “Religion is experience . . . It is the response of man’s nature to his highest inspirations.”
- 5) The Bible was seen as “the record of the progressive religious experience of Israel culminating in Jesus Christ.”
- 6) Ethics supplanted doctrine as the center of the faith. As such, the task of the church was to transform the “earth into a household of brethren dwelling together in peace and goodwill.” It was to “make the world the Kingdom of God.”

In the course of the late-nineteenth century, liberals in the Presbyterian Church became increasingly assertive leading the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1910 and 1916 to declare that all candidates for ordination should be able to affirm: 1) the inerrancy of scripture, 2) the Virgin Birth, 3) the substitutionary atonement, 4) the bodily resurrection, and 5) the miracle-working power of Christ. These eventually came to be known as the five fundamentals. The Presbyterian Church, in the early-twentieth century, despite a growing number of theological liberals, remained overwhelmingly conservative in theology as revealed by these commitments. Though these

⁵ This section follows Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, 87ff.; and Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 133ff. Full notes can be found in these works.

fundamentals hardly summarized the Reformed faith, they built a hedge around the requirements for ordination, setting something of a baseline for church leadership.

Despite these tensions, liberals and conservatives were, for the most part, able to live in peace in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the wake of World War I, and in the midst of the cultural crisis of the roaring 20s, however, theological differences in the church exploded in the fundamentalist/modernist controversy.⁶ In 1922 Harry Emerson Fosdick, a liberal Baptist preaching by special arrangement in First Presbyterian Church of New York, preached “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” which contrasted liberal and conservative positions and declared that liberals were not going to leave the church, so tolerance was the only Christian way forward.

To be brief, in response to Fosdick’s sermon, the General Assembly in 1923, reaffirmed the five fundamentals as necessary for ordination and J. Gresham Machen, an instructor at Princeton Seminary who would become a leader of the conservative party in the church, published *Christianity and Liberalism*, in which he declared that liberalism “is not Christianity at all, but a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct category.”⁷ Machen was passionately concerned about the spiritual decline of the age but insisted that the primary way the church influenced culture was through ideas. As such, the preservation of strict doctrine was imperative.

Liberals, not to be outdone by conservatives, composed a document that came to be known as the Auburn Affirmation, which declared that the five fundamentals were “theories” concerning doctrines of the church but that these were “not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures” and the Westminster Confession and that doctrinal declarations needed the consent of the presbyteries.

⁶ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, 9ff. Full notes can be found there.

⁷ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 6-7.

Therefore, the church needed to allow freedom on doctrinal matters to preserve its unified mission to the world.⁸ This document would come to play a major role in the years ahead.

The controversy would not settle down, however, and by 1925 liberals at the General Assembly, led by Coffin, were threatening schism.⁹ New York Presbytery, contrary to the fundamentals, had licensed two candidates who could not affirm the Virgin Birth of Christ, and the General Assembly returned this to the presbytery for correction. Charles Erdman, who was conservative theologically but more concerned with the united mission of the church than with fine points of doctrine, had been elected moderator. Given the threat of schism, and Erdman's conviction that a united church was necessary for the moral influence of the church on the nation, Erdman moved the creation of a special commission to study the unrest in the church. This commission, which reported back in 1926 and 1927, recommended abandoning the fundamentals as requirements without disavowing them as doctrines and, agreeing with the Auburn Affirmation, allowed that such requirements should have been sent to the presbyteries.

Though the adoption of the Commission's report ended this chapter in the battle, quiet would not come, and this time the issue was Christian mission, specifically the missionary Pearl Buck. Pearl Buck was the daughter of southern Presbyterian missionaries, the wife of a northern Presbyterian missionary, and a missionary to China herself. Early in her career Buck had subscribed to orthodox evangelical convictions, but by the 1920s was adopting more liberal views and by the 1930s had significant questions about the supernatural aspects of Christianity. In 1932 she won the Pulitzer Prize for her book *The Good Earth*.¹⁰

In 1933 Buck gave a speech to over two thousand women at the Astor Hotel in New York City where she denied the doctrine of original sin and seemed to deny the divinity of Christ. Nonetheless,

⁸ See Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, 77ff. Full notes can be found there.

⁹ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 153ff. Full notes can be found there.

¹⁰ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 160ff. Full notes can be found there.

she insisted, Christ should be shared “as the essence of men’s dreams of simplest and most beautiful goodness.” Buck’s speech, combined with the publication of a *Re-Thinking Missions* in 1932, a liberal manifesto funded by Rockefeller, resulted in a storm of protest from conservative Presbyterians. Buck resigned her post, but that was not enough for Machen who founded an Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. As a result Machen was suspended from ministry, and he and others founded the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

While these battles were fought primarily over questions of theology and ecclesiology, all of the players in this conflict were concerned with the role of Christianity in the culture and how that role was to be exercised in the dramatically changed and rapidly changing world of post-World War I America.

Even as the fundamentalist/modernist battles were winding down, the winds of theological change were blowing.¹¹ In 1935 southern Presbyterian Francis Miller joined H. Richard Niebuhr of Yale Divinity School and Wilhelm Pauck of Chicago Theological Seminary to publish “The Church Against the World.” The 1929 stock market crash and following economic depression combined with the rise of fascism in Europe created, as historian Sydney Ahlstrom noted, “an inhospitable atmosphere for an outlook [theological liberalism] that required a daily diet of visible human progress.”

H. Richard Niebuhr, in the introduction to “The Church Against the World,” asserted that the church was captive to the culture and claimed, “we live . . . in a time of hostility when the church is imperiled not only by an external worldliness but by one that has established itself within the Christian camp. Our position is inside a church which has been on the retreat and which has made compromises with the enemy in thought, in organization, and in discipline.” Francis Miller expanded on this theme in his section claiming, “The domestication of the Protestant community in the United States within the framework of a national culture has progressed as far as in any western land. . . . A process which began with a culture molded by religious faith has ended with religious faith molded by a national culture.” The

¹¹ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 163ff. Full notes can be found there.

church, Miller insisted needed to recapture a sense of God’s sovereignty and human sinfulness and adopt a Christian frame of reference rather than the “frame of reference supplied by American culture.”¹²

By the middle part of the century this neo-orthodox turn was reflected at most Presbyterian seminaries by the likes of Elmer Homighausen at Princeton, Joseph Haroutunian at McCormick, and Arthur Cochrane at Dubuque. Neo-orthodox thinkers and preachers argued not that Christians shouldn’t be involved in the culture, indeed it could be claimed that they were more socially engaged than liberals, but that the culture should not set the agenda for the church. The Scriptures, not religious experience, were the touchstone and basis for all faith and discipline and Christians needed to listen to God’s Word for their marching orders.

While many Presbyterian liberals were taking a chastened turn into neo-orthodoxy, many from the fundamentalist camp, having lost major battles in the recent controversy, were seeking new ways to influence church and culture. Henrietta Mears, raised a Baptist in the upper Midwest, joined the staff of First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood California in 1927 which, due in part to Mears’ extraordinary ministry, became the largest Presbyterian church in the country by 1949.¹³

Mears developed her own Sunday school curriculum that stressed the biblical narrative and doctrine and eventually founded Gospel Light Press to make it widely available. Mears, reflecting the evangelical emphasis on conversion, was convinced that Sunday school teachers should “have the winning of lost souls as [their] supreme passion” and that Sunday School lessons should make clear the “WAY OF SALVATION.”

Mears reflected the “mid-century evangelical ambivalence towards American society and culture,” in that, while she was concerned over the direction of America, she was hopeful that the

¹² Quoted in Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 164-65, and H. Richard Niebuhr et al., *The Church Against the World*, from excerpt in *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy*, ed. Sydney Ahlstrom (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967), 591.

¹³ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 167ff. Full notes can be found there.

proclamation of the Gospel could redeem the nation. Sunday school teachers were engaged in a battle against secularism and communism and were front line soldiers in the effort to Christianize the culture. Only Christian revival, she declared, would prevent “the complete annihilation of civilization.” She inspired hundreds of individuals to become pastors or missionaries and was thought by some to be “the greatest preacher in Southern California.” Indeed, one historian suggested “she may have had more to do with shaping west coast Presbyterianism than any other person.”

With the advent of World War II, John Foster Dulles, child of a liberal Presbyterian manse, became a major voice in ecumenical circles planning for post-war world. Dulles, who would become Secretary of State under Eisenhower, authored “The Six Pillars of Peace,” a document of the Federal Council of Churches, which reflected in a profound way the “American democratic faith” in a fundamental moral law, humans as free and responsible individuals, and the mission of America to promote these ideals.

The Federal Council, here, downplayed the distinctiveness of Christianity, in order to broaden its appeal for world peace. Dulles worked with the churches because he was convinced that “of all groups they could make the greatest contribution to world order.” But, as historian Heather Warren has noted, the Federal Council, by framing its document in the language of the American democratic faith, prepared the way for the “generalized religiosity” of the mid-century years.

In the wake of World War II, and with the advent of the Cold War, the National Council of Churches, the successor body to the Federal Council of Churches, pursued the goal of “a Christian America in a Christian world.”¹⁴ Mainline churches engaged in evangelistic crusades both to proclaim the Gospel and to combat the twin threats of Catholicism and communism. John Mackay, president of Princeton Seminary, declared that unless the church pursued aggressive evangelism “the secular order will be organized by Communism and the religious order by Romanism.” Billy Graham was, of course,

¹⁴ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 177ff. Full notes can be found there.

front and center in the postwar revival, and he found many supporters among Presbyterians, not the least of whom were Henry Pitney Van Dusen, president of Union Seminary (New York) and Elmer Homrighausen, dean of Princeton Seminary.

But not all in the Presbyterian camp supported the “conversionist evangelism” of Graham. Charles Templeton, for example, evangelism secretary for the northern Presbyterian Church, criticized Graham’s simplistic message and, in 1957, called for the church to broaden its definition of evangelism to include “the attempt to end racial segregation, to get better housing, to feed the hungry, . . . to halt injustice and work for peace.” By the 1960s, in the midst of the cultural crises of that decade, such arguments, merging evangelism and social action in the culture, were winning the day in the corridors of both the northern and southern Presbyterian churches.

Among those who continued to emphasize the importance of verbal evangelism were many graduates of Fuller Seminary, a school founded in 1947 to be a “new Princeton” in the wake of the fundamentalist/modernist conflicts.¹⁵ Charles Fuller reflected the same concerns about Catholicism and Communism as John Mackay, “The Communists and Catholics have well-trained leaders,” Fuller wrote, “but Protestantism . . . need[s] to be unified to do effective work.” Harold Ockenga, the first president of Fuller who had trained under Clarence Macartney, declared that the seminary’s tasks included training Christian leaders and “saving Western civilization.”

The founders of Fuller were all conservative Republicans who saw evangelism as important, not only in its own right, but also as a means of protecting capitalism against the threat of communism. In this, they were supported by the wealthy Presbyterian layman, J. Howard Pew. Though there were early tensions between Fuller and the local presbytery, over time, as Fuller embraced a “broader evangelicalism,” relations between the school and the mainstream church became more cordial. By the

¹⁵ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 180ff. Full notes can be found there.

1980s, Fuller was one of the largest educators of Presbyterian clergy and has continued to have a major impact on American Presbyterianism.

In 1956 the Presbyterian Church in the USA approved the ordination of women as clergy and in 1962 the Presbyterian Church in the US followed suit. Both moves reflected, as sociologist Mark Chaves has argued, the increasing emphasis on gender equality in American culture at large. But the most famous Presbyterian woman of the decade (perhaps challenged only by Henrietta Mears) was Catherine Marshall, daughter of a southern Presbyterian minister and widow of Peter Marshall, late chaplain of the US Senate and pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C.¹⁶

In the wake of her husband's death in 1949, Catherine Marshall started to write, first editing a collection of her husband's sermons, before authoring the best selling biography of Peter Marshall, which became a major motion picture for 20th Century Fox. In her books Catherine Marshall revealed the tensions revolving around the roles of women in mid-twentieth-century America. Peter had warned in his sermons that Christian women were responsible for teaching the faith to their children. Otherwise paganism would flourish and the country would be doomed. But Catherine in the wake of her success, struggled to reconcile the responsibilities of a Christian wife as articulated by her late husband and her career as a writer. "The conflict in me," she wrote, "was . . . basically a clash between femininity and the career that pressed in upon me." One biographer notes that "the issues [Catherine Marshall] was forced to confront in the 1950s . . . were precisely those that would be eagerly taken up by an entire generation of American young women, including many ministers' wives, in the decades that followed." At the same time that the church was approving the ordination of women, due at least in part to cultural pressures, conflicting cultural norms were also pressing in upon women to conform to traditional roles. The church provided a key arena for the expression of these tensions.

¹⁶ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 182ff. Full notes can be found there.

While Catherine Marshall was finding her way among shifting norms, Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the newly formed United Presbyterian Church and devoted ecumenist, proposed a union among, at least, The United Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ. Blake worried that in the face of an “increasingly secular” culture the Protestant churches needed to present a united front. This proposal resulted in the birth of The Consultation on Church Union (COCU), which elected James McCord, president of Princeton Seminary, as its chairperson. At first this proposal garnered significant support, but by 1970 the efforts were floundering.¹⁷

While there were clearly biblical and theological reasons behind the ecumenical impulse, sociologist Robert Lee argued in 1960 that “the increase in church unity springs in considerable measure from the pressures of a growing cultural unity within American society.” This being the case, the fragmentation of American society in the course of the 1960s contributed to the demise of COCU. Robert McAfee Brown allowed in 1969, “These are tough times for the ecumenical movement . . . Again and again one hears the estimate, ‘Ecumenism has had it.’” The decade, as Leonard Sweet has noted, which had started with “belief, fresh hope, and high ambition,” had ended with “broken dreams, worn out emotion, [and] shattered institutions.”

Blake saw the crusade for church unity as intimately involved with the civil rights movement of the era.¹⁸ A 1958 church survey concluded that “in its racial behavior the local church tends to reflect the prevailing winds of the social atmosphere that surrounds it, some individual Christians to the contrary.” Blake supported Eisenhower’s decision to send federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to enforce desegregation and in 1958 explained, “There is no segregation at the Cross, and the church through its assemblies has repeatedly taken the stand that the segregation of people on the grounds of race has no place in a church or society that calls itself Christian.” Here, Blake implied, that the Presbyterian Church still stood as a custodian of a Christian America.

¹⁷ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 189ff. Full notes can be found there.

¹⁸ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 191ff. Full notes can be found there.

Earlier, the southern Presbyterian Church had adopted the position that “enforced segregation . . . is out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics,” though many southern Presbyterians appealed to the “spirituality of the church” and insisted that the church should not address such civil affairs. In 1964, in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s march on Birmingham, Alabama, both the northern and southern churches abolished segregated presbyteries, though this action was not fulfilled for years. Issues surrounding race continued to exercise the church and indeed, contributed to a schism that led to the birth of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in 1973.

Another important issue that contributed to the formation of the PCA was talk of reunion with the northern Presbyterian Church.¹⁹ The United Presbyterian Church had been formed in 1958 through a merger of the Presbyterian Church in the USA and the United Presbyterian Church of North America. One result of that merger was the composition of the Confession of 1967 and the adoption of a Book of Confessions that, historian James Moorhead has claimed, “presaged a looser style of Confessional identity.” Many southern conservatives saw this as a sure sign that the northern church had drifted from its theological moorings. Reunion talks with the northern church as well as increasing unhappiness with the direction of the PCUS led to the formation of the PCA in 1973. The new church declared that, “a diluted theology, a gospel tending toward humanism, an unbiblical view of marriage and divorce, the ordination of women [and] financing of abortion on socio-economic grounds” led to the division with the PCUS.

In 1981 conservatives in the northern church left to form the Evangelical Presbyterian Church over concerns about doctrine (specifically about the divinity of Christ) and polity (specifically around the ordination of women) in the church. In the interim the northern and southern churches, divided since 1861, continued reunion negotiations. Though not everyone supported the merger, both assemblies voted overwhelmingly to reunite. Donald Shriver, PCUS minister and president of Union Seminary (New

¹⁹ This follows Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture*, 197ff. Full notes can be found there.

York), noted that the increasing American identity of the South helped move southern Presbyterians toward reunion. J. Randolph Taylor, moderator of the General Assembly of the reunited church, was convinced that reconciliation in the church could promote reconciliation in the society. “Now that we have made peace among ourselves, we can address peace in the world. We need to work for a just church in a just world and we need continually to strive for peace.” Unfortunately the church, reflecting the culture wars of the late-twentieth century, found peace hard to come by in the years ahead.

Since the reunion of the northern and southern Churches in 1983 the communion has seemingly moved from crisis to crisis, from abortion, to ordination of gay and lesbian individuals, to the more radical aspects of feminist theology, to same-sex marriage, to the struggles in the Middle East. And behind all of these is a massive hemorrhage in membership, a decline of 50% since 1965.

These struggles are aggravated by the question of theological identity and the church’s relation to the culture. And while there is no way to completely disentangle the church from the culture, the church needs to continually assess what in its life is congruent with the Gospel and ask how it can, in the midst of its theological diversity and situated in a secular culture, develop a healthy sense of identity that can empower vital worship and faithful mission.

There are no simple answers to these questions, but let me close by simply mentioning a couple areas of life, congregational life and Sabbath practice, that might help us to recapture a clearer sense of identity in an effort to live faithfully in a radically changing culture.

Sociologist Mark Chaves has recently made the point that congregations’ “core activity is the broadly cultural one of expressing and transmitting religious meanings through ritual and religious education.” Indeed, inasmuch as congregations are “instantiations of larger traditions, institutions, and movements,” if denominational identity and culture is not nurtured at the congregational level, it will likely, for the bulk of Christians, not be nurtured anywhere. After all, most Christians, Presbyterians

included, identify with their local churches and program, not with national boards and agencies.²⁰ But given the breakdown of the Protestant establishment in America, those who seek to nurture Christians find themselves in unfamiliar territory.

Kirk Hadaway and David Roozen, have summarized the situation this way:

The most fundamental problem for the ebbing mainstream is the lack of compelling reasons for people to participate. It is no secret that many mainstream churches, and all mainstream denominations, have lost confidence in who they are and why they are . . . Mainstream churches are drifting, and they are drifting within an unreality because mainstream churches, by and large, continue to cling to an establishment model of being THE church, when in fact they no longer have the captive culture or subculture for such a model to work.²¹

In the midst of a culture that no longer offers support for, and in many respects is opposed to, Christian virtues, Hadaway and Roozen insist that “clear purpose and direction” is imperative for congregations.

All too often, they argue, congregations have become comfortable as social service agencies and have forgotten that the primary mission of congregations is to be religious institutions, “to provide a setting for religious experience and answers to ultimate questions.” Hence, Robert Wuthnow, concluded that clergy, “fail to recognize the extent to which they have accommodated to the wider culture—and thus the extent to which their sermons fall on deaf ears because people are hearing nothing new, nothing that challenges them to live any differently than their neighbors who have no interest in religion.”²²

Just as religious discourse is largely avoided or dismissed in the public sphere, it also tends to be avoided in many mainline congregations. For fear of violating someone’s views or imposing one’s own views or revealing a lack of any substantial views, serious religious discourse has been eschewed or abandoned in congregation after congregation. Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens, in their work *Vanishing Boundaries*, concluded “few active Presbyterians spend much time talking or learning about

²⁰Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5, 207; Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 117.

²¹C. Kirk Hadaway and David Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 75.

²²Hadaway and Roozen, *Rerouting the Mainstream*, 65, 76-77; Robert Wuthnow, *Crisis in the Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7-8.

matters pertaining to religion . . . Presbyterians still say grace at meals, but they rarely have family devotions or read the Bible together, and religion is not a frequent topic of family conversation.”²³

This lack of attention to the faith and practices of the church has contributed to the current state where “American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.” “The religiosity of American teenagers,” Kenda Creasy Dean recently argued, “must be read primarily as a reflection of their parents’ religious devotion (or lack thereof) and, by extension, that of their congregations.” “The hot lava core of Christianity,” she concludes, “the story of God’s courtship with us through Jesus Christ, of God’s suffering love through salvation history and especially through Christ’s death and resurrection, and of God’s continued involvement in the world through the Holy Spirit—has been muted in many congregations, replaced by an ecclesial complacency that convinces youth that not much is at stake.”²⁴

It is this kind of abandonment of the primary religious message and mission of the congregation that the late John Leith contended lay at the root of the church’s recent struggles. “The primary source of the malaise of the church,” he wrote, “is the loss of a distinctive Christian message and of the theological and biblical competence that makes its preaching effective.” Likewise, Leander Keck, former Dean at Yale Divinity School, has called for a renewal of theology rooted in the classical Christian tradition and proclaimed week in and week out from the pulpit. Though “academic theologians can renew theology for the churches,” Keck allowed, “it is preachers grappling with the meaning of the faith for today who will renew it in the churches.”²⁵

²³Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Doubleday, 1993); Hoge, Johnson, Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries*, 115.

²⁴Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3-4, 11.

²⁵Leander Keck, *The Church Confident* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 64, 66, 67.

The lack of serious and sustained religious discourse in congregations is aggravated in many mainline churches by the lack of significant community — or the expectation that people will engage in significant acts of fellowship. In an important study of fellowship ties and the transmission of religious identity, Dan Olson argued that “the ability of religious subcultures to transmit and maintain a religious identity will vary with the depth and number of fellowship ties among the subculture participants.” But in most mainline congregations, fellowship ties tend to be less dense — that is friendships less close, relationships less intimate — than in many conservative congregations (or most twelve-step programs) and the content of conversations shies away from religion. Mainline churchgoers, he contends, “who solely identify themselves with the privatized public culture . . . carry with them strong taboos against religious talk. . . . Such privatization, when carried within the walls of the church, robs religiously based ties of their religious content and greatly limits their ability to transmit religious identity.”²⁶

Ironically, he notes, the mainline commitment to inclusiveness, tolerance, and diversity in the end actually weakens the very possibility of community. Olson writes:

Partly because of close ties to the public sector and public-sector values, and partly because of theological conviction, many in mainline denominations actively seek to incorporate the diversity of society within the church. This diversity includes differences of ethnicity, language, class, sexual preference, *and belief*. The irony arises because, in the search to create a “community,” the resulting diversity makes it difficult to define a common identity upon which strong community ties can be based.²⁷

Olson’s emphasis here is not on diversity of ethnicity or class but belief: even with the best of intentions a community can only withstand so much ideological diversity before it begins to unravel.

²⁶Dan Olson, “Fellowship Ties and the Transmission of Religious Identity,” in *Beyond Establishment: Protestant Identity in a Post-Protestant Age*, eds. Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 37, 48-49. On the particular failure of ministers to share themselves with their congregations, see Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets: A Memoir* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 36-38.

²⁷Olson, “Religious Identity,” 49.

A final aspect of congregational life that needs to be mentioned, discipline, derives from Dean Kelley's now classic study, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. There Kelley, an executive with the National Council of Churches, argued one key cause of mainstream decline was the failure of the mainline bodies to require distinct commitments and articulate a clear belief system. Churches that stress pluralism and relativism rather than distinctive beliefs and lifestyles, Kelley argued, experienced the greatest membership losses.²⁸

Kelley insisted that strictness does not necessarily imply authoritarianism or fundamentalism, but it does entail that churches be clear and serious about who they are. He writes:

There is no reason the members of a nonfundamentalist congregation could not sit down and ask themselves . . . what, if anything, they are prepared to be serious about and then do it. . . . They could center on just a few things for a start, but those things would be binding on all members. Perhaps choosing one or two of the ten commandments would be a bit severe as a beginning, so they might decide to join together in Bible study one evening a week; not every night as some monastic communities or Jehovah's Witnesses do; maybe a trial period of three months would be as strenuous as could be expected for beginners. This *reductio ad absurdum* may suggest how far most mainline churches are from serious discipleship.²⁹

If denominations are to nurture faithful Christians, Kelley would allow, a first step is to arrive at a clear understanding of how their particular community construes the faith and what that means for faithful Christian living. This does not prohibit flexibility and the recognition of a variety of gifts, but it does mean that congregations, especially in a secular society, need to be clear about what it means to become a member of the body of Christ and expect some kind of conformity. Perhaps it will mean that everyone is expected at Sunday worship. Perhaps it will mean that all will work in a soup kitchen, all will

²⁸Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1972), 84, 85.

²⁹Dean M. Kelley, "Commentary: Is Religion a Dependent Variable?" in Dean R. Hoge and David Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 343.

join a prayer group, all will work at Habitat for Humanity, all will tithe. But the message would be: Christianity requires commitment to distinctively Christian living.³⁰

As James Davison Hunter recently argued, “Christians must cultivate tension with the world by affirming the centrality of the church itself and the parish or local congregation in particular. . . . As a community and an institution, the church is a plausibility structure and the only one with the resources capable of offering an alternative formation to that offered by popular culture.”³¹ If Christians are going to reclaim a sense of identity apart from the culture, it will have to happen in local communities of faith.

Congregations, of course, are not the only place—and are not an isolated place—for the development and nurture of Presbyterian identity. Families serve as important arenas for the building of religious identity, but many Presbyterians do little to nurture piety and a sense of Christian distinctiveness at home.

Historically, one way Presbyterians have cultivated Christian identity is through observance of the Sabbath, a practice that has fallen on hard times and may, in our fracturing society, be worth reassessing. The Presbyterian Church, from its inception on these shores through the early part of the last century, made Sabbath observance a major emphasis of the faith. Presbyterians and other evangelical denominations protested Sunday mail delivery, Sunday papers, and backed “blue laws” in many locales as a means of Christianizing the nation. The Sabbath, they insisted, was a crucial part of God’s ordering of creation and was ignored with great danger. In the course of the early-twentieth century, Sunday outings, sports events, and papers challenged the Presbyterian view of the Sabbath.

³⁰Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens have recently supported Kelley’s thesis. See Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries*, 181ff.

³¹Hunter, *To Change the World*, 282-83.

But even more disconcerting to many, was the increasing violation of the Sabbath by Presbyterians themselves by the 1930s.³²

In 1948 the Committee on the Sabbath of the PCUS observed that many members of the church, “Piously recite the Ten Commandments, the confession and creeds, observe the sacrifices and feasts on a Sabbath morning; [then] go to movies, the races, or athletic contests on the afternoon; [and] to a cocktail party in the evening.” Presbyterians, as individuals deeply involved in a culture that was moving rapidly away from specifically Christian influences, found themselves torn between traditional pieties and secular pleasures and, in time, the culture won. By 1950 the subject of Sabbath observance was essentially dropped from the concerns of Presbyterians North and South. In the words of sociologist Benton Johnson, “By the 1950s the Presbyterian Church was a relatively undemanding place to be, an attractive spot for people who were repelled by the stern do’s and don’ts of their own upbringing, but who still wanted a Christian home base for themselves and their children.”³³

Some might argue that Sabbath practice is a small matter with no bearing on the weightier issues of the faith. But Johnson correctly observes that the Sabbath “is not a trivial thing when we remind ourselves that spiritual practice is one of the three pillars of a religious tradition, the other two being its teaching and morality.” He continues:

Spiritual practice waters the roots of the soul and thereby enlivens the spirit. When done by members of a community, it recreates the energy to sustain its morality, which means that it is able to sustain both itself and its various missions The church’s mission, whatever it is, cannot continue without the energy generated by its teachings and spiritual practice. Evangelism cannot be effective if the churches have no message to proclaim that is compelling and distinctive, and no regimen for spiritual care and renewal³⁴

³²See Benton Johnson, “On Dropping the Subject: Presbyterians and Sabbath Observance in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Presbyterian Predicament: Six Perspectives*, ed. Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 90-95.

³³Quoted in Johnson, “Sabbath Observance,” 98; Johnson, “Sabbath Observance,” 106.

³⁴Johnson, “Sabbath Observance,” 107.

John Burgess makes a similar point in his claim that “The Sabbath commandment is thus the cornerstone of the whole Decalogue. It tells us that grateful worship and service constitute our true identity. It points us to God and to others.”³⁵ In short, spiritual disciplines like Sabbath observance are key to maintaining and nurturing a distinctive identity as Reformed Christians.

The problem, as Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens have noted, is that for decades now Presbyterians have “made choices that aided their children to be world-conscious, open, autonomous, and . . . not committed to the specific traditions of the church.” Additionally, Presbyterians did not adopt new disciplines to replace those they were abandoning, leading to the loss of markers from the culture at large. The result, these three allow, is that “The children have asked over and over what is distinctive about Presbyterianism . . . and why they should believe it or cherish it.”³⁶

What a proper Sabbath might look like is certainly an open question. For many, the thought of Sabbath observance conjures up thoughts of long lists of dreary prohibitions and restrictions. But far too many American Christians are now imprisoned by frantic schedules that leave no room for re-creation, for appreciation of the holiness and grace of life. So the question is not one of freedom versus bondage. The question is, “What kind of discipline will free us for faithful living?”

Perhaps as a modest first step, in order to make the Sabbath a day of holy remembrance and holy renewal, Presbyterians might discipline themselves, as Presbyterians, not to shop on Sundays. In a society where consumerism and materialism exert an overwhelming force on Christians and non-Christians alike and Sunday has become like virtually every other day of the week, such a move would at least begin to build a hedge around the day.³⁷ And perhaps, freed from the tyranny of consumption, new

³⁵John P. Burgess, *After Baptism: Shaping the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 60.

³⁶Hoge, Johnson, Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries*, 200, 192.

³⁷Dorothy Bass suggests this in “Keeping Sabbath: Reviving a Christian Practice,” *Christian Century*, Jan. 1-8, 1997. Calvin suggests that one reason for the Sabbath was to ensure rest for servants and workers subject to us. In a capitalist society retail workers are surely among such people. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,

possibilities—time to enjoy creation, each other and God, time to talk, time to visit, time to pray—would open.

Of course, in today's day and age, the notion that individuals or families should set aside an entire day for holy renewal is a fairly radical notion. But as Dorothy Bass claimed, "Good Sabbaths make good Christians by regularly reminding us of God's creative, liberating, and redeeming presence, not only in words but also through a practice we do together in response to that presence."³⁸

A renewed identity and unity in the church is not going to come through the application of some formula, whether complex or simple. But it will certainly not come without Presbyterians recapturing a sense of and appreciation for the richness of the Presbyterian heritage and rebuilding the personal disciplines necessary for sustaining a faithful community. This will entail, at the very least, the building of congregations where laity are schooled in the language and history of the faith and the nurturing of disciplines and practices that reflect the values of the Kingdom of God rather than the prevailing culture.

Historian Robert Wilken has contended that, "for too long Christianity has relinquished its role as teacher to society. Instead of inspiring the culture it capitulates to the ethos of the world." In response, he pleaded, "The Church must rediscover herself, learn to savor her speech, delight in telling her stories, and confidently pass on what she has received. Only then can she draw people away from the course and superficial culture surrounding us into the abundance of life in Christ."³⁹ American Presbyterians have, within their tradition, the resources to heed Wilken's plea and speak a distinct and hopeful word to the world. To do so would require, at the very least, that they first heed the call to loosen their embrace of the surrounding culture.

trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 400. See also Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 1-9.

³⁸Bass, "Keeping Sabbath," 16.

³⁹Robert Louis Wilken, "The Church's Way of Speaking," *First Things*, August/Sept 2005, 31.

