Globethics Repository

Globethics

Same as it ever was

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Hart, D. G.
Publisher	Gannon Murphy
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-19 20:18:43
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/236461

SAME AS IT EVER WAS: THE FUTURE OF PROTESTANTISM IN THE GLOBAL NORTH

D. G. Hart[1]

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. That Dickensian reading of nineteenth-century London also appears to be the story line for twenty-first-century journalists covering religion in North America. On the one hand, editors seem to want copy that reveals the spread and growth of Christianity in the global South like the report filed by Somini Sengupta and Larry Rohter for the *New York Times* in the fall of 2003. This article on "The Changing Church" revealed the remarkable vitality and popularity of Christianity (particularly Pentecostalism) among Nigerians. The reporters quoted one Lagos lawyer who said that in countries like the United States "where everything is O.K. . . . people are very lethargic when it comes to religion and God. . . . They seem to have it all." The story went on to editorialize that this was not the case in the developing world like Nigeria "where Christianity is drawing followers as never before." This growth, the reporters added, "is changing the complexion and practice of the Christian faith . . . and causing schisms between the old Christians of the north and the newer ones of the south."[2]

On the other hand, editors also have a certain taste for stories on North American religion that feature the novel and unconventional practices of Christian churches. Roughly four months after the piece on Pentecostalism in Nigeria appeared in the *Times*, another story on church growth appeared, this time on "emerging" or "postmodern" churches in or around, of all places, the vicinity of Lake Wobegone, Minnesota. Here in the American heartland, as the headline for the report had it, "Hip New Churches Pray to a Different Drummer." These cutting-edge congregations feature a mix of contemporary and ancient, rock praise bands and Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox rituals with a smattering of multi-media presentations for the more affluent of the "emerging churches." Furthermore, with a website (www.ginkworld.net) listing more than 300 of such congregations, along with analysis from Northern Baptist Seminary's Robert Webber about the churches with the best chance of reaching Generation X, the editors at the *Times* detected a phenomenon sufficiently large and growing to merit space among all that is fit to print.[3]

Although these two sorts of news stories, one on the spread of Christianity in the global South, the other on the vitality of North American Christianity, appear to be at odds, they actually reinforce a common rendering of Christian history over the last three decades. These stories reveal two different attitudes to the contemporary spread of Christianity. The first, on

---

[1] D. G. Hart, PhD, is the Director of Partnered Projects at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (www.isi.org). He was previously dean of academic affairs and professor of church history at Westminster Seminary California where he remains on the adjunct faculty. He is the author of numerous books, including: *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Era of Billy Graham*; *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*; and *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies and American Higher Education*. This article is adapted from Hart's address in 2004 at "The Future of the Church in a Globalized World," a conference sponsored by the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, Virginia.

[2] Somini Sengupta and Larry Rohter, "Where Faith Grows, Fired by Pentecostalism," *New York Times* (Oct. 14. 2003).

[3] John Leland, "Hip New Churches Pray to a Different Drummer," *New York Times* (Feb. 18, 2004).

the church in the southern hemisphere, underscores the vitality and growth of Christianity in non-western or non-European settings. Thanks to the work of a variety of academics, subsequently reinforced by journalists, the rise of so-called global Christianity has begun to challenge older notions about the West, the residue of Christendom in Europe and North America, and whether other parts of the world are in fact more Christian and thus indicate the direction of Christianity's future. The second story on innovative churches in the United States contradicts, at least to some degree, this reading of Christianity's prominence in the global South. The "emerging" church movement is simply the latest evidence of American Christianity's amazing dynamism and creativity. It also underscores the perception that the United States is uncannily Christian despite a variety of other political and social circumstances that make it one of the most secular nations on the planet. As such, while the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria leads to the Christianity-is-dying-in-the-West-and-alive-in-the-South story line, the rise of "emerging" churches reinforces the narrative of America's religious exceptionalism. Such uniqueness, of course, proves that God is indeed dead in the West except for that most modern and secular of places, the United States.

Despite this apparent tension in journalism about contemporary Christianity, these stories cohere in one important respect. Both reinforce the notion that the older patterns and forms of Christian practice, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, have run out of gas. For instance, in their report on Nigeria, Sengupta and Rohter observe that Pentecostalism, not simply in Africa but also in South America, is "bumping up against established Christian churches . . . chipping away at what has been a virtual Roman Catholic monopoly" at least in Latin America. They add that these new churches' appeal has been "seemingly irresistible. Worship today is a far cry from the rituals once imposed by European missionaries. Services are conducted in Swahili and Igbo. Most of all, services can be much livelier than their European antecedents." According to the Bishop of Nairobi who was recently back from attending Mass in Rome, "I found the way they celebrate the Eucharist a bit boring."[4] If historic Christian forms of worship are losing their appeal in the global South, in the upper mid-West of the United States the piety of boomers has become geriatric. The megachurches of the 1970s and 1980s, according to the story on the "emerging" church, were too rational, predictable, and oriented to performance. As the reporter describes the "emerging" congregations in Minneapolis, "At Spirit Garage . . . in a small theater, congregants can pick up earplugs at the door in case the Spirit Garage Band is too loud. At Solomon's Porch across town, a crowd of about 300 takes weekly communion 'house party'-style, chatting with plastic cups of wine and pieces of pastry before one announces, 'Take and eat the body of Christ.'"[5] Consequently, whether the site of greatest Christian vitality is the southern hemisphere or the home of Scandinavian-American culture and the Mall of America, the historic practices and worship of Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians is clearly in decline, at least by the lights of the *Times*' religion reporters.

What follows is an attempt to say an encouraging word on behalf of the old and decrepit, not a fun assignment but certainly one that could be valuable if it generated better understanding of the current predicament for Protestant churches. The particular old and decrepit that I have in mind are the faith and practices that gave rise to Protestantism. The

[4] Quoted in Sengupta and Rohter, "Where Faith Grows."
[5] Leland, "Hip New Churches."

concern here is not so much to defend the sociological phenomenon of denominationalism, a religious structure bound up with the polity of the United States particularly and the decline of ecclesiastical establishments in the West more generally. Instead, the aim is to show that the understanding of Christianity that fueled the formation of such different communions as Lutheranism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, and Reformed, has a future even if its current prospects look bleak. Although the points to follow almost exclusively involve Protestantism, they do by implication extend to Roman Catholicism since both older branches of western Christianity depend upon an understanding of Christianity that features churchly ways of practicing the faith. To be sure, the ministry of word, sacrament, and discipline is a topic over which Protestants and Roman Catholics vigorously disagree (or at least used to). But these older ways of practicing the Christian religion and the debates over them that ensued in the West for at least two centuries after the Protestant Reformation are precisely at issue in current discussions about the future of Christianity. As such, to regard the current Christian situation as a question of either western or southern global hegemony is to miss a more basic issue of whether ecclesial Christianity is a legitimate, if not normative, Christian expression. Even if current discussions of religion in the press consider irrelevant the sort of theological, ecclesiastical, and liturgical questions that divided western Christianity first into Protestants and Roman Catholics and then into Protestant denominations, my own conviction is that these ecclesial forms of faith are still crucial to Christian ministry and witness and so cannot be neglected in any evaluation of Christianity's vitality.

The Sociological is Spiritual

Two questions are crucial to the argument here. The first addresses the criteria by which scholars and journalists assess the apparent vitality of contemporary Christianity and the so-called decline of older Christian practices. How do we evaluate Christian expressions and what are the standards used to regard one as more dynamic or vigorous than another? For those who have not spent much time thinking about the way scholars study religion, the answer to a question about criteria might look amazingly simple: you look and see where the most is, that is the most people, the most seats, the most excitement, the most energy, the most difference—in other words, the most religious stuff to count, measure, and analyze. But such an apparently empirical approach (the one preferred by the modern academy) begs all sorts of political, social, and religious questions.

For instance, the study of American religion fifty years ago was synonymous with the study of the most wealthy Protestant denominations in the United States. But what about groups outside the Protestant mainline: the Reformed Episcopalians, the Nazarenes, the Orthodox Presbyterians, let alone Mormons, Roman Catholics, and Jews? In other words, care needs to be given when describing a religious phenomenon as distinctly *American*, and scholars finally began to be more cautious coincidently at the same time that the Supreme Court found mainline Protestant expressions of piety in public schools to be unconstitutional. So if caution is necessary when describing something as American religion—it was not simply Protestant—how much more so when using the word *Christian*? To conclude that a person, practice, group, or communion is Christian is not merely a descriptive act but one fraught with a host of normative factors. Rarely, however, do

journalists or scholars writing on contemporary religion show their cards in considerations of what constitutes real Christianity.[6]

What then have been the criteria to evaluate the current Christian situation in the global South? What traits, in other words, tempt observers to conclude that the new forms of Christianity are establishing patterns for the future? As already mentioned, the first feature that stands out is numerical. The statistics on Christianity in the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century are remarkable. In a review of David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2001), the Blue Book as it were of market value in the contemporary church, church historian Mark Noll summarizes to great effect the statistics that show Christianity moving from the global North to the South. Barrett's encyclopedia shows, that "For the African continent, . . . the number of affiliated Christians is increasing at a rate of more than eight million per year, with 1.5 million of that number 'net new converts (converts minus defections or apostasies)'. . . The numbers in Asia and Latin America are equally dramatic. The contrast to these numerical gains, however, is almost equally staggering losses in Europe and North America, where . . . each year nearly three million church members cease practicing the faith."[7] According to Noll, not since the transfer of Christianity from the Mediterranean world to Europe during the early Middle Ages has such an unprecedented transformation occurred. He even refers to the history of Christianity in the twentieth century as *revolutionary* because of this shift from Europe and North America to Africa and South America. In sum, on the basis of these statistics a scholar can say the West is no longer the homeland of Christianity.

The advantages of new world Christianity are not merely quantitative. It also exhibits qualities that seem to explain its numerical success. According to Philip Jenkins, in his book, *The Next Christendom*, the issue that most divides northern and southern Christianity is the "matter of spiritual forces and their effects on the everyday human world."[8] One important manifestation of this difference is the incredible popularity of Pentecostalism in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Indeed, two of the most important recent studies of the new Christian growth in Latin America, David Martin's *Tongues of Fire* (1990) and David Stoll's *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (1990), feature the tremendous appeal of Spirit-filled Christianity in regions formerly dominated by Roman Catholicism.

Although easily caricatured by God's "frozen chosen"—that is, Calvinists like myself—charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity does in fact display teaching and practices that to observers accustomed to more routine and measured (read: boring) forms of Christianity, a faith full of spontaneity, vigor, and excitement. How could it not? Here is a form of faith in which the miraculous and supernatural are not simply close to the surface but in your face. Jenkins describes this Pentecostal spirituality as one where exhorters "preach messages that, to a Westerner, appear simplistically charismatic, visionary and apocalyptic." He adds that "in this thought-world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith-healing, exorcism, and

[6] On the dominance of Protestantism in the academic study of religion in the United States and the secular turn in religious studies, see D. G. Hart, *The University Gets Religion: Religious Studies and American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

[7] Noll, review of Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia*, *Church History* 71, no. 2 (2002), 448.

[8] Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 123.

dream-visions are all basic components of religious sensibility."[9] At several points in his book on Latin American Protestants, the sociologist David Martin describes Pentecostal services that follow the pattern of worship that has characterized contemporary Praise & Worship with an opening period of praise songs and prayer, followed by a long sermon, and concluding with a time of prayer, testimony, and healing. Martin's commentary on this kind of worship is instructive for explaining the perceptions of journalists and scholars from the North who may be unfamiliar with it. He writes: "Whereas the older Protestant denominations stressed literacy, which might turn out to involve a longish process of learning to read, Pentecostals work with the oral tradition, aided sometimes by the visual icons of religious television and cinema." It is an exhilarating mixture of fishing "in the deep waters of the ageless spirit world and, at the same time, [conveying] intimations of modernity." Such exotic combinations undoubtedly account for the perception that something truly new and more importantly spiritual is at work in southern Christianity.[10]

If the new Christianity presents a more vigorous and spiritual form of worship, its provision of physical blessings are no less striking, maybe more so. As many scholars have argued, part of the success of southern Christianity stems from its operating in a universe parallel to that of animism and spiritualism. Yet, the spiritual access provided by charismatic and Pentecostal faith is not simply religious in that adherents assume a new identity in Christ through the transforming work of the Spirit. The Spirit's presence and power also heals bodies and generates wealth. Many scholars have observed that the appeal of charismatic forms of Christianity is strong precisely among those segments of the population on the front line of urbanization and industrialization. In such conditions, the church becomes a vehicle for social services yet to emerge from either governmental or community sources. According to Jenkins, "The churches provide a social network that would otherwise be lacking, and help teach members the skills they need to survive in a rapidly developing society."[11]

Yet the assistance to come from these new Christian communities is not the complete story. Undergirding the welfare and communitarian components of these churches is a theology that regards divine power as a daily and immediate aid in combating the desperate circumstances of poverty, hunger, and illness. Despite the popular perception that Spirit-filled Christianity is escapist and otherworldly, Jenkins counters by noting that southern Christianity is precisely the opposite "since faith is expected to lead to real and observable results in this world." The reason is the belief that "God intervenes directly in everyday life," thus constituting the antidote to the kind of spiritual evil these Christians believe to be constantly present.[12] In effect, the earthly realities of jobs and education are merely a platform upon which the contest between the forces of the Spirit and evil are performed. According to one Brazilian pastor, the new southern churches' "main appeal is that they present a God that you can use." "Most Presbyterians," he adds, "have a God that's so great, so big, that they cannot even talk with him openly, because he is far away. The Pentecostal

[9] Ibid., 8.
[10] David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 167, 168.
[11] Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 74.
[12] Ibid., 77.

groups have the kind of God that will solve my problems today and tomorrow. People today are looking for solutions, not for eternity."[13]

Yet, upon closer inspection the success of this new form of Christianity reveals a phenomenon with more ties to the past and is less regional than first impressions might suggest. The apparent vitality and growth of Christianity in Asia, Latin America, and Africa is actually replaying earlier patterns of Protestantism's expansion. Several students of southern Christianity have noted that revivalism accomplished among eighteenth century English Methodists and nineteenth century American Protestants what Pentecostalism is doing today in Latin America and other places. Jenkins summarizes this literature well:

> What we are now witnessing in the global South is very much what occurred in the North when it was passing through a comparable stage of social development. We can trace countless parallels between Pentecostal growth today and the much-studied story of English Methodism in the century after 1760, the most rapid stage of British industrialization. Then, as now, popular sects arose to meet the needs that could be filled neither by secular society, nor by the established churches, which had scarcely a foothold in the burgeoning cities. The new Dissenting churches were a triumph of cooperative endeavor, at once providing material support, mutual cooperation, spiritual comfort, and emotional release in the bleak wastes of an expanding industrial society.[14]

What stands out in this comparison is a method of evaluation that tallies up Christian effectiveness by its churches' ability to meet real financial and physical needs through teachings that conceive of divine power not as remote or spiritual but as immediately accessible and that overcome daily trials and sin. In sum, what northern Christianity used to possess but lost thanks to its churches' affluence and power, southern Christianity now has in dramatic ways: profound and life-changing religious experiences, powerful demonstrations of divine presence, and churches that build solidarity and minister in a holistic fashion. It is no wonder that many fear whether European Christianity and its North American descendent can muster a faith as vibrant, Spirit-filled, relevant, and compassionate.

Them Dry Bones

One of the lessons of church history, whether corporate or individual, is that religious intensity cools. The very marks of religious success are also usually the ingredients of religious decline. Here it may be helpful to recall that the best North American parallel to contemporary southern Christianity, the Spirit-filled revivalism of Methodism and other pietistic Protestants, became so successful in overcoming Western Christianity that these Christians became the Protestant mainline or establishment, according to the parlance of an earlier time. Methodists and Baptists took their experiential faith all over the heartland while revivalist-friendly Congregationalists and Presbyterians established a myriad of organizations—educational, welfare, and religious—that constituted the so-called

[13] Pastor quoted in ibid.
[14] Ibid.

Benevolent Empire.[15] These antebellum efforts succeeded in Christianizing the United States and forming the mainstream American Protestant tradition. By the early twentieth century this revivalist-inspired faith had lost some of its original religious vitality—how couldn't it given its staggering wealth and organizational might? But what William R. Hutchison wrote of these denominations in their twentieth century opulence, namely, that these churches "felt responsible for America: for its moral structure, for the religious content of national ideals, for the educative and welfare functions that government would not . . . carry out," may also come to be true of today's southern Christian churches.[16] After all, if both started with movements of the Spirit that issued in individual stability and community improvement, what is happening now in the southern churches could well yield the Third World equivalent of the National Council of Churches.

This might sound like an unpromising basis upon which to defend traditional Protestantism since it could come across as implying an inevitable decline of vibrant faith into organizational and bureaucratic torpor. It is also a perspective that could leaven optimistic predictions about the future of southern Christianity with the yeast of caution. Nevertheless, pointing out the loss of religious vitality among the older denominations is a flimsy foundation for establishing the ongoing necessity of historic Protestantism. After all, some of the most vibrant churches in the global South are Protestant denominations of western lineage. Moreover, defending one group on the basis of its rival's possible weakness does not constitute a vindication. To argue that sixteenth century Protestantism may still make a valuable contribution to future Christian witness and service will require those churches to produce real assets; this older faith cannot simply be the default setting for Christians who prefer their faith less enthusiastic.

But before proceeding with an argument on behalf of traditional Protestantism, an important conceptual clarification is necessary. As opposed to the common differentiation between Christianity in the global South and that of Western Europe and North America, a temporal classification makes better sense than the regional one employed currently by journalists and scholars. Here the difference has less to do with the contrasts existing on opposite sides of the equator or even with different patterns of modernization. Instead, a more fundamental issue concerns the altered state of affairs that emerged after 1740. Prior to that date, which is roughly the beginning of the First Great Awakening, Protestantism was an overwhelmingly churchly faith. That is to say, with the exception of the Anabaptists whose own forms of community encouraged a corporate conception of the Christian faith, the major branches of the Reformation—Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican—understood the fundamental realities of Christianity in relation to the teaching, liturgical, and disciplinary ministry of pastors and priests. Following the lead ironically of nineteenth-century American political history, some scholars have referred to this form of Protestantism as confessionalism or liturgicalism.[17] One of the figures who lived during the times these

[15] For an older but still informed assessment of this Protestant activism, see Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (1957; rev. ed., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

[16] William R. Hutchison, "Preface," to William R. Hutchison, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), viii.

[17] See, for instance, Daniel Walker Howe, "Religion and Politics in the Antebellum North," and Robert P. Swierenga, "Ethnoreligious Political Behavior in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: Voting,

political historians analyze was John Williamson Nevin, a high-church German Reformed theologian best known for the theology that bore the name of the seminary where he and Philip Schaff taught, Mercersburg. Nevin rendered one of the better definitions of confessional or historic Protestantism in his autobiographical reflections about the small Presbyterian church in which he was reared. He wrote:

> Being of what is called Scotch-Irish extraction, I was by birth and blood also, a Presbyterian; and as my parents were both conscientious and exemplary professors of religion, I was, as a matter of course, carefully brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, according to the Presbyterian faith as it then stood. . . . [T]hat the old Presbyterian faith, into which I was born, was based throughout on the idea of covenant family religion, church membership by God's holy act in baptism, and following this a regular catechetical training of the young, with direct reference to their coming to the Lord's table. In one word, all proceeded on the theory of sacramental, educational religion, as it had belonged properly to all the national branches of the *Reformed* Church in Europe from the beginning. . . . The system was churchly, as holding the Church in her visible character to be the medium of salvation for her baptized children, in the sense of that memorable declaration of Calvin (*Institutes* 4.1.4), where, speaking of her title, *Mother*, he says: "There is no other entrance into life, save as she may conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us from her breasts, and embrace us in her loving care to the end."[18]

As this excerpt makes clear, this older Protestant piety revolved around the churchly activities of word, sacrament, and ordination. To many of Nevin's peers, his account of Protestantism sounded Roman Catholic and he received criticisms in kind. But as he also pointed out effectively, the older forms of Protestantism shared much in common with Roman Catholics, thus initiating a reform of western Christianity's churchly piety, not a revolutionary new form of devotion.

Nevin is a valuable guide to confessionalism because he was astute in sensing an epoch-making shift in Protestant sensibilities in the wake of revivalism. Although he reserved his sharpest criticisms for Charles Finney, Nevin came to view the whole turn toward the subjective experience of individual believers in conversion and personal forms of devotion, first posited by pietists and some Puritans in the seventeenth century, and then reinforced in the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth, as a fundamental break with the older Protestant churchly faith.[19] What Nevin recognized, as few American Protestants have, is that from its eighteenth century iteration down to the present, evangelicalism has had a fundamental disagreement with other versions of Christianity, Protestantism included. George Whitefield well captured that conflict in 1739 on one of his first preaching campaigns in America. After looking at the variety of Protestant denominations he

---

Values, Culture," in Mark A. Noll, ed., *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 121-71.

[18] John Williamson Nevin, *My Own Life: The Early Years* (Lancaster, PA: Historical Society of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1964), 2-3.

[19] For Nevin's importance as a critic of new Protestantism, see D. G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005).

concluded that "It was best to preach the new birth, and the power of godliness, and not to insist so much on the form: for people would never be brought to one mind as to that; nor did Jesus Christ ever intend it."[20] This characteristic indifference to form was what drove the new form of Protestantism to oppose nominal Christianity, that is, the idea that people could simply go through the motions and fake true religion. But a consequence of this anti-formalism was to teach generations of born-again, Spirit-filled believers that forms do not matter, only the Spirit does. And so wherever revivalism and its zeal went, out also went the churchly practices that old-time Protestants identified with true Christianity.

With this distinction between the new and the old forms of Protestantism in mind, a case for traditional Protestantism can be more concrete and perhaps more useful than one that simply distinguishes between good and bad forms of revivalism.[21] The new Protestantism, the one achieving significant momentum and adherents during the First Great Awakening, clearly has a future. As long as modernity continues to dislocate individuals from traditional communal patterns and create the need for new forms of association, healing, and a direct encounter with divine power, the new Protestantism will thrive. But this form of Protestantism does not leave much room for the older Protestant faith. Because religious experience and practical holy living are so central to new Protestantism, the church is at best a supplement to real religion, which is a direct encounter between the Spirit and the soul. And with a reduced role for the church, the sorts of doctrines and practices that define the older Protestantism appear to be little more than a luxury that SUV-driving, Latte-sipping North American believers can afford.[22]

The issue then is whether the pre-revival form of Protestantism has a future and the answer depends on whether word, sacrament, and discipline have a future. Of course, not everyone would understand these hallmarks of the church to be the essence of traditional Protestantism. To be sure, sociologists and political scientists have good reasons for thinking about the different liturgies, creeds, and polities of the various Protestant churches as either a way of adjusting to religious liberty after the revolutions of the eighteenth century or as an expression of different strata within the socio-economic order. Still, the matters that separate Presbyterians from Lutherans and Episcopalians have much to do not only with the vicissitudes of Anglo-American politics but also with competing understandings of the church, its ministry, liturgy, and polity. So the question is whether the churchly matters that keep Protestants in traditions have a future. More specifically, in light of the dramatic shift of Christian zeal from the global North to the South, has a Presbyterian or Lutheran way of ministry become superfluous? What is the point of being an Orthodox Presbyterian when individual congregations in Africa and Asia by themselves have twenty times the members that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church does? In other words, can old-fashioned Protestantism produce religious goods and services comparable to the astonishing results of the churches in the global South?

---

[20] Whitefield quoted in Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 25.

[21] See, for instance, Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).

[22] For an extended discussion of the differences between old and new Protestantism, see D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

These questions pose the real rub for defenders of Protestant traditionalism and underscore the importance of being clear about the criteria for evaluating Christian faith and practice. The categories of analysis—whether visible or invisible, economic or doctrinal, physical or spiritual—determine not simply the answers but the very questions put to different Christian communions. For, when judged by the obvious success of southern Christianity, the historic Protestant denominations generally come up short. The older Protestants do not have the numbers, the transformed lives, amazing stories of healing, charismatic leaders, or close-knit community. Some might attribute this to the northern churches' wealth and status which inevitably quenches the Spirit. Others might look to a religious formalism that again poses barriers to the free movement of the Spirit. Whatever the explanation, the older Protestantism lacks vitality to attract large numbers and the power to make a difference. It may have possessed a dynamic spirituality at one time but its orthodoxy has died, its heart has grown cold, its practice has become formalistic or nominal.

Before calling for the mortician, perhaps the Protestant denominations need the care of a different specialist, one who can discern vital signs not obvious to the other spiritual experts. Here it may be useful to ask if the older Protestants possess benefits and their own stories of success not as obvious to empirically-oriented scholars and journalists. Interestingly enough, the Westminster Divines, a northern Christian body if there ever was one, asked just such a question in the Shorter Catechism that Presbyterians in Scotland, the United States, and Canada soon adopted as one of the better tools for learning the basic outline of Christian doctrine. In the thirty-second question of the catechism the teacher asks, "What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?" The use of the word *benefits* here is arresting if only because it implicitly promises a gospel that is utilitarian, one that works to give believers certain goods and services. It is a question that suggests northern Christianity would like to think that it possesses resources that are attractive and may even make the world a better place.

The answer to question thirty-two of the Shorter Catechism, however, gives a different impression. It reads: "They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them." That response likely disappoints many because it sounds like the same old issues about which western Christians have been debating and talking and since the sixteenth century. Such disappointment likely stems from the assumption, the Protestant modernist one to be specific, that the world situation has changed rather dramatically since the early modern period and consequently the church needs a new set of teachings for a different set of circumstances.[23]

Before commenting on the differences between the benefits available through the new and old forms of Protestantism, the means by which these advantages described in the Shorter Catechism are accessible deserve some comment. The Westminster Divines also use the language of benefits in their discussion of the so-called "outward and ordinary means," or more commonly, word and sacrament. In question and answer eighty-five they elaborate three responses to the gospel required of true believers. The first two, faith and repentance,

[23] William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) discusses thoughtfully the modernist assumption that led American Protestants to revise Christianity to fit modern life.

are standard fare. But the third, "the diligent use of all the outward means," is often a surprise to low-church Protestants of the revival-friendly variety, an unexpected response because of the new Protestant assumption that genuine belief is virtually independent of the ministry of the church. What is more important for my purposes here is that answer eighty-five explains that these outward means of word and sacrament actually become the instruments by which "Christ communicates . . . the benefits of redemption." The word *benefits* is a reference back to the earlier part of the catechism where the Divines elaborate the doctrines of justification, adoption, sanctification, assurance, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Spirit, increase of grace, and perseverance to the end—all the privileges available to believers through the gospel. In other words, the benefits that Christ gives believers through the means of word and sacrament are the spiritual realities described in Calvinist teaching about justification and sanctification.

So what? So the Westminster Divines were smart enough to weave an understanding of the benefits of redemption through their Shorter Catechism? Why is this important? One way to answer is to note that these realities of Christianity, the basic benefits of salvation, are communicated through the ministry of the church. In other words, word, sacrament, and discipline (having a lot to do with ordination) are means of salvation. And if that assertion is plausible then the future of old Protestantism is indeed bright. For, those historic parts of Christian faith and practice are not mere relics from a bygone age but the power by which God effects salvation. Or at least that is how the Westminster Divines conceived of it, along with the officers in the Lutheran churches, and the Church of England. In fact, all Protestants, no matter how low their view of the church, at one time believed that the ministry of word, sacrament, and ordination was essential for the salvation of men and women, boys and girls. If they did not believe such, what was the point of being a Protestant? As such, if word, sacrament, and ordination have a future, then historic Protestantism does.

Some may be underwhelmed by such a case for old Protestantism's future. After all, preaching, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the laying on of hands in the rite of ordination have been around for a long time and of late appear to be less than vigorous. In fact, ever since 1800 the most obvious displays of Protestant strength have been in those places, like the nineteenth-century United States and now the global South, where the Spirit appeared to use very different means from those older Christian forms. Consequently, isn't a reiteration of the importance, if not the necessity, of word, sacrament, and ordination simply a naive way of ignoring Protestant history over the last quarter of a millennium?

To be sure, questions of this sort have a point. But they also beg another set of questions, which is why again the criteria for evaluating Christian phenomena is so significant. Whether they acknowledge it or not, many of the journalists and scholars who write about modern Protestantism, whether the revivals of the 1820s, the Toronto Blessing of the 1990s, or the recent explosion of Christianity in the global South assume that the religious practices and teachings they are observing are genuine. Far be it from me, a white man of European descent likely to be dead in a few decades, to question the sincerity or authenticity of southern Christians. Still, the point is simply to observe that to treat revivals, healings, charismatic experiences, and religious leaders uncritically—to accept these things as being really spiritual and alive—assumes they are the work of God in some way. In fact, to

call them Christian is not simply a neutral observation but a judgment perhaps best left to certain officers in the church.

Even so, the real aim of raising the question of evaluative criteria is to show how much more difficult it is for the older Protestantism to display religious phenomena that have the "ring" of a work of God. It is, in other words, to demonstrate how often the analysis of Christianity in the global South assumes that Christianity in the global North is dead. Ever since 1740 the expectation has been for divine power to manifest itself in highly visible ways such as ecstatic experiences, gifted, eloquent and spiritual leaders, powerful demonstrations of changed lives, and mass meetings of believers. But the sorts of benefits promised by the older Protestantism, to use again the Westminster Divines as an example, are incredibly hard to discern and, for that matter, even harder to believe. For instance, how can you spot someone who has been justified, that is someone who now walks around wearing the imputed righteousness of Christ (Shorter Catechism Q&A 33)? Or what signs do you look for when investigating those who have been "received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God" (Shorter Catechism Q&A 34)? And what about sanctification? This one may be more visible since it involves dying to sin and living unto righteousness. But observers should beware because the counterfeits of self-righteousness and moralism can easily mask the much more difficult feat of discerning who is actually "renewed in the whole man after the image of God" (Shorter Catechism Q&A 35). Of course, one response to these sorts of questions is to say that no journalist or religion scholar would ever pretend to be able to discern justification, adoption, or sanctification, that is, those older forms of salvific benefits. And if religion scholars and journalists could exhibit that kind of intellectual modesty, the reporting and analysis of faith might be far better than it is. The benefits of faith, those otherworldly goods and services, are indeed matters of the spirit and as such they lay outside the professional competency of journalism, history, anthropology, and sociology for starters.

But a nagging question persists. Why do journalists and scholars refuse to show a similar hesitancy or professional reserve when evaluating the *new* Protestantism? Why do these forms of religious observance such as healings, speaking in tongues, and revivals—religious expression no less mysterious or spiritual than justification, adoption or sanctification—generate descriptions and accounts which take these spiritual phenomena at face value as dramatic displays of vital Christianity? One obvious reason for the different kinds of coverage and scholarship on new and old Protestantism is that the former demonstrates its authenticity precisely through visible means while the latter's manifestations of spiritual vigor are largely invisible. The Westminster Divines appeared to be aware of the invisible and mysterious quality of salvation when they wrote the chapter from their confession on Christian liberty. Because Protestants in the global North (at least since the seventeenth century) have assumed that Protestantism, as opposed to Roman Catholicism, was the form of Christianity on the side of political liberty and democracy, the language the Divines use to describe Christian freedom is striking, especially since they also explicitly deny that such liberty has anything to do with political or civil freedom. Christian liberty, they wrote:

> . . . consists in [believers'] freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also their free

> access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind. [20.1]

Again, what is striking about this description of another benefit of redemption is how spiritual and invisible it is. Yes, it does involve the resurrection of the body, an occurrence that could generate lots of news stories and scholarly monographs. But otherwise, except for the possible acquisition of certain virtues—many of which appear to be practiced by those outside the church—the benefits of salvation from the old Protestant perspective are not discernible. In this case, old Protestantism could very well be alive, well, and prospering. But no one would ever know it, nor would its vitality interest either an editor at a news desk or at a university press.

The Weight of Glory

Nevertheless, a bias toward the observable among journalists and scholars does not instantly make a case for old Protestantism. The benefits of redemption taught by Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Anglicans, may be hard to see but the question still remains: are they truly beneficial? The answer to this question again involves a more fundamental consideration. Because the benefits described in confessions like that of the Westminster Divines are articles of *faith*, not visible *effects* of religious causes or conclusions of logic, convincing the skeptic of these blessings' truly beneficial character will be a hard sell, one that may even require divine intervention of an illuminating sort. Still, a few comments about the public discourse employed in analyses of salvation might be useful, by way of conclusion, to put the question of religious benefits or advantages in perspective.

The differences between the old and new Protestantism are not simply in the realm of perception, one being invisible or hard to discern, the other being very visible because of its numbers, intensity, and dramatic displays of divine power. Perhaps a more fundamental difference is the one between the eternal and the temporal, that is, between the world to come and the here and now. As the Brazilian pastor quoted in Jenkins' book put it, "Most Presbyterians have a God that's so great, so big, that they cannot even talk with him openly, because he is far away. The Pentecostal groups have the kind of God that will solve my problems today and tomorrow. People today are looking for solutions, not for eternity."[24] This assertion may not be representative of most pastors ministering in the context of the global South. But its bold contrast between the temporal and the eternal, between the South and the West, does help to illustrate the outlook that has dominated analyses of global Christianity. Southern Christianity is booming because it daily proves its efficacy by producing real, tangible relief for those enduring suffering. Western Christianity, by contrast, offers theological complexity or liturgical precision, but hardly has the goods to make a difference upon those people most in need here and now.

Without wanting to diminish the difficulties that southern Christians face in their economic, political, and physical conditions, is it possible to suggest that pastors who concentrate on these realities are a tad short-sighted? What happens if another political or economic system takes better care, or if another religion provides more control over the spiritual forces seemingly causing so much affliction for Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians? This is more or less a pragmatic question. But the ultimate question is the eternal

[24] Quoted in Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 77.

one of death. Will those Christians miraculously healed or even the ones benefitting from modern medicine still face death? Or how about those believers for whom Christianity has instilled a work ethic that yields physical comfort, whether it be clothing for children or a high-definition flat-screen TV? Will these benefits make much of a difference when men and women, as the prophet says, fade like the grass? And what of the significant manifestations of the Spirit in the worship of Christians, whether in Lagos or Minneapolis? What will be the advantages or benefits of these spiritual gifts on judgment day? To be sure, such questions may strike some as sanctimonious or precious. But if Christianity is at least in part a religion that promises eternal life, that no matter how difficult the sufferings of this life may be, believers have hope for relief in the world to come, then questions of eternal significance have genuine merit in evaluating contemporary Christianity, whether in the global South or West.

The eternal aspects of Christianity do not necessarily play to the older Protestantism's advantage. American churches have contributed their fair share to locating Christianity's chief benefits in the here and now, whether through the voluntary associations of the Second Great Awakening's Benevolent Empire or through the more ambitious programs of cooperation and ecumenicity cultivated by the Social Gospel. Even so, the Protestants who marginalized the eternal in their recognition of significant temporal realities, still affirmed in their creeds and confessions an understanding of the Christian ministry that regarded the gospel's chief purpose as overcoming sin and death. The first question and answer to the Heidelberg Catechism expresses the otherworldly character of the gospel in a remarkably simple and yet profound manner. It teaches that my only comfort in life and death is "That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

A real temptation for folks who study Christianity or profess it after hearing such an affirmation of the gospel is to acknowledge its truth and even its poignancy but then add that the Christian religion involves more than salvation from sin. Such a reaction has merit since this affirmation from the Heidelberg Catechism is only the first of 129 questions and answers. Christianity does involve more than a remedy for sin and death. But one of the important reasons for the decline of Protestantism in the West is that temporal concerns—overcoming disease, poverty, grief—obscure eternal realities. As the bumper sticker has it, "Christ is the answer," and if he is not the answer to all of life's troubles then Christianity seems to be a poor contender for the allegiance of the world's inhabitants. But if older Protestantism has a future it needs to recover a conviction, once strong in its ministry, that the church's role is not to solve this world's problems, as soul-wrenching as they may be. Instead, it is to minister through word and sacrament what no other institution on earth can, namely, the good news of eternal salvation through Jesus Christ.

Here the example of J. Gresham Machen is instructive.[25] A leading New Testament scholar at Princeton Seminary who emerged as the most articulate spokesman for Presbyterian conservatives during the modernist-fundamentalist controversy, Machen was the token conservative for sundry debates, conferences, and roundtables. In 1933 the American Academy of Political and Social Scientists invited Machen along with representatives from mainline Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism to speak on the responsibility of the church in the new age. The new conditions that the church needed to address were fairly obvious to most Americans four years into the Great Depression. But a failing economy was not the only matter on the minds of social scientists since the nation's experiment with Prohibition was just ending and overseas Germany was sending signals of a new political order. Machen was undeterred, however, in his conviction that the church's responsibility in such circumstances was the same as it has always been. He asserted:

> The responsibility of the church in the new age is the same as its responsibility in every age. It is to testify that this world is lost in sin; that the span of human life—nay, all the length of human history—is an infinitesimal island in the awful depths of eternity; that there is a mysterious, holy, living God, Creator of all, Upholder of all, infinitely beyond all; that He has revealed Himself to us in His Word and offered us communion with Himself through Jesus Christ the Lord; that there is no other salvation, for individuals or for nations, save this, but that this salvation is full and free, and that whosoever possesses it has for himself and for all others to whom he may be the instrument of bringing it a treasure compared with which all the kingdoms of the earth—nay, all the wonders of the starry heavens—are as the dust of the street.[26]

In Machen's day, fellow Christians objected to such a narrow and otherworldly conception of the Christian ministry. Similar criticisms could well be imagined today, many stemming from the sort of perspective that led Protestant modernists like Harry Emerson Fosdick to accuse fundamentalists like Machen of responding to the world's difficulties with the doctrine of verbal inerrancy. In his famous sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" the Baptist provocateur declared, "And now, in the presence of colossal problems, which must be solved in Christ's name and for Christ's sake, the Fundamentalists propose to drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration. What immeasurable folly!"[27] In Machen's case, Fosdick's charge had the correct vowel but the wrong doctrine since the vicarious atonement went far in the conservative Presbyterian's understanding of what the world needed to hear from the church. Even so, Fosdick's rejoinder about the foolishness of conservative Protestantism is not far from most people's sentiments when they encounter Machen's prescription for the responsibility of the church no matter what age or region, no matter how colossal the problem. For Christianity to be truly effective, most moderns think, surely it can do more

---

[25] On Machen, see D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

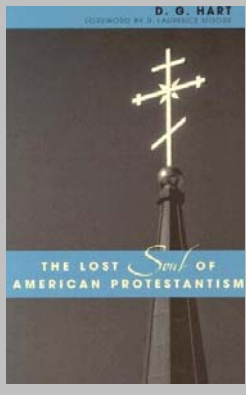
[26] Machen, "The Responsibility of the Church in the New Age," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed., D. G. Hart, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 376.

[27]. Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" reprinted in William R. Hutchison, ed., *American Protestant Thought in the Liberal Era* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1968), 181.

than offer hope of another world to come. Certainly, if it is truly a powerful faith it can do something about human misery in this world.

One notable Christian evangelist in the history of Christianity responded to these sorts of objections in an instructive and provocative way. He conceded that some people looked for smart and effective ways for Christianity to make a difference, while others were more interested in powerful displays of Christianity's ability to transform lives. But in the end Christianity's significance consisted exclusively in Christ's death and resurrection. This particular evangelist happened to be the apostle Paul who was planting churches and evangelizing in places where the modern forces of industrialization and urbanization had yet to surface. But some of the churches to which he wrote were not entirely different from either Pentecostal congregations in twenty-first-century Lagos or "emerging" churches in the Twin Cities because first-century Christians, just like contemporary ones, looked for evidence of the Spirit in powerful displays of faith and devotion. But Paul's point about preaching only "Christ and him crucified" was that the matter of spiritual significance were not so easily discerned. The gospel, in fact, came packaged in "jars of clay" to prove that the power of Christianity was from God. For this reason he advised the church at Corinth to "look not to the things that are seen" but instead to the "unseen" because "the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor 4:18).

Aside from Paul's status as an apostle, even on the level of pastoral counsel or academic analysis his teaching is well worth considering when evaluating the health of either global Christianity or the historic churches in the West. Some churches today may not possess statistics, dynamic worship, or obvious social relevance. But to the degree that they minister Christ through word and sacrament, and to the extent that they offer a remedy for the eternally weighty matters of sin and death, those churches, along with all others that preach Christ and him crucified, may have more relevance than journalists or scholars can see. It might not be the kind of relevance that will attract reporters or inspire academic conferences. But as Paul counseled the Corinthians, such neglect might be precisely the result of a religion that to many looks weak and foolish but for those with eyes of faith it could very well be "the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18).



In *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, D. G. Hart examines the historical origins of the idea that faith must be socially useful in order to be valuable. Through specific episodes in Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Reformed history, Hart presents a neglected form of Protestantism, *confessionalism*, as an alternative to prevailing religious theory. He deftly argues that the history of confessional Protestantism is vitally important to current discussions on the role of religion in American life.. Hart suggests that, contrary to the legacy of revivalism, faith may be most vital and influential when it is not practical.

Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004; 232p.