



The 2006 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

“For Such a Time as This” Esther 4:14

Introduction

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

The theme for the 2006 lectures is “For Such a Time as This.” Esther was a Jewish teenager in the Persian kingdom who was chosen from a harem to become queen. She soon found herself called to a difficult and dangerous task, one that would save her people. Her cousin Mordecai entreats her, “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). Esther accepts the call, albeit reluctantly, and implores her faith community to fast and pray in solidarity with her.

Esther’s is a story of tenacious courage, a willingness to follow God’s call, and a firm trust that the community of faith will survive by the grace of God. Her story provides a rich theme for the 2006 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, for we live in a time when courage is often called for in ministry and when many challenges face the church and its young people. These lectures address a range of topics within this theme, including the future of the church, the nature of time, the practice of lament, and the call for youth to speak out.

May these lectures feed your mind and renew your ministry.

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2006 Lectures

Douglas John Hall

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Finding Our Way into the Future • *Douglas John Hall*

The witty and provocative English Catholic thinker G.K. Chesterton once wrote: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried.”¹ Chesterton did not mean that Christianity had never been “tried”—and indeed wonderfully exemplified—by many individuals and groups, including his great hero Thomas Aquinas; but he questioned whether the civilization calling itself “Christian” had ever seriously attempted to live the vision bequeathed us by the New Testament.

What this kind of generalization brings home to us is the fact that the way of Jesus Christ—“the Christian ideal” as Chesterton calls it—always exceeds our actual performance as Christians. We must never be so complacent as to imagine that we’ve actually lived Christ’s way in our individual or corporate lives. In a real sense, the way of Jesus Christ is always still waiting to be tried.

This is true in a quite dramatic way today, as we enter a whole new phase of the voyage of the ship called “church”; and to be young today, I think, must fill those who are moved by the Christian message with an exceptional, if somewhat apprehensive, sense of adventure. Christendom—that form of the church that has dominated the West for more than a millennium and a half—is ending; Christianity once more waits to be tried. How shall we make our way into the future, as Christian people and churches, beyond Christendom?

One thing is certain: we shall not be able to do this without experiencing at first hand what Chesterton calls the “difficulty” of the way of Jesus Christ. There can be no easy transition from sixteen hundred years of Western Christendom to the church of the future. It is evident that a large number of Christians are unprepared even to attempt such a transition. Whether intentionally or out of habit, they seem to assume that the only way into the future for Christians is a repetition of Christendom past, only better, stronger, bigger! They set themselves, as did Christian missionaries, princes, and crusaders of the past, to conquer in the name of Christ. But is conquering what Jesus Christ asks of us today? How could we engage in this “conquering” without riding roughshod over the faith and integrity of others—how, in this

pluralistic society, how, on this fragile planet that is already beset and besieged by so many conquerors? Surely in that direction lies only strife and violence. The way of imperial Christendom has always been, potentially and actually, a war-prone way, but today in this “global village” that earth has become, it is quite unavoidably and conspicuously so. There is not a conflict on the face of this planet that is not fueled by some religion or other, and the Christian religion, as religion,² is no exception to this rule. The “difficulty” of Christianity that we must all encounter in an original way in our time could in fact be stated in precisely these terms: namely, that unless we are able, as Christians, to discover ways of conducting our life and our mission that differ radically from the Christendom form of the church that has dominated throughout most of Christian history, we shall be doomed in the future to be part of our world’s problem, and not its solution.

How, then, should we proceed? There is, I think, no single, concrete answer to that question. Many possibilities will be tried, and many experiments in post-Christendom Christianity have already been attempted. No doubt many of these attempts will fail; some have already failed. But here and there new (or perhaps very old and overlooked!) approaches to Christian life and mission will take root, and eventually—very slowly, in all probability, for as it is said, the mills of God grind slowly—eventually it will be seen that the Christendom form of the Christian movement was only one of many possible forms, and a seriously flawed one at that!

For the present, I think, the most important step that any serious Christian or Christian community can take toward the future is a deliberate and disciplined step in understanding. Like most people who feel called upon today to speak publicly about these matters, I am frequently asked, “But what can we *do*?” We North Americans have always been a practical people, activists to the core! In the face of any problem, we want to be able to act, and to do so soon—at once! Our brand of success as a people is perhaps greatly due to this kind of practicality. But mere activism does not help, and in fact it often greatly hinders, where a whole spate of planetary problems are concerned, problems that have become, in our time, the most pressing—including the great instabilities of economic and other forms of injustice, war, and violence, and the degradation of the natural order. All such problems are only exacerbated by the kind of let’s-do-something approach that I ascribed, in my previous lecture, to the Henny-Pennys of our society. Act we certainly must; but pertinent acting, judicious acting (for Christians, obedient acting) presupposes the

often much harder work of thinking, including that form of thought that is called prayer.

Years ago, I saw a poster in the most unlikely place—a Protestant church!—that read, “Don’t just do something, sit there.” This, I believe, is the first requirement for any Christian person or congregation or denomination today that wants to find a way into the future. Thought—original, deep, critical, theological thinking—is the *conditio sine qua non*—the condition without which the Christian movement will not find its way into the uncertain future. Another word for the kind of thought of which I am speaking is the much-misunderstood word “theology.” Ours is a time when theological reflection may be the most important thing Christians can do if they are earnest about their future.

More to illustrate what I mean by this than to exhaust its meaning, I want to comment on three key areas of Christian theology as they might contribute to our endeavor to move beyond Christendom to new ways of understanding our life and mission in a post-Constantinian, religiously diverse, and humanly challenging social context. The three areas are Christology (what we understand by the person and work of Jesus, the Christ), anthropology (what Christians think about human nature and destiny), and ecclesiology (how we conceive of the church and its mission). I have no intention here of attempting anything comprehensive. I only want to suggest ways in which the contemplation of these three areas of Christian doctrine can evoke from us inspiration and courage for the journey ahead, particularly when it is undertaken (as real theology must always be) in dialogue with an intentional and informed awareness of “the signs of the times,” the *zeitgeist*, the “context.”

Jesus, the Christ

We begin at the beginning—indeed, at the very center of the Christian confession, namely, our confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ. As we reflect on this confession, we remember that, today, in a way that was not true of Christendom past, we do so as citizens of a society in which precisely this confession is no longer everybody’s confession. Of course, it never was, in reality. But in the Christendom situation, which managed to extend itself on this continent well into the twentieth century, it could seem to be a nearly universal assumption. Courts of law, the human rites of passage, commerce, public ceremonial, and the like—all could assume a certain openness to the name Jesus Christ, or, if not exactly an openness, certainly a grudging recognition.

Today, apart from in isolated pockets of our population, this is no longer the case. High percentages of the populations of Western countries may and do still claim some connection with the Christian religion; but serious Christians in these once-monolithically Christian nations realize that they are in a minority situation where earnest and thoughtful attention to the name of Jesus Christ is concerned. How, then, should we work out our understanding of the high significance of this name in such a way, on the one hand, as to avoid falsely offending those who do not belong to this particular household of faith and, on the other hand, so as to engage those who are on the edges of faith or are at least curious whether something good may still come out of Nazareth?

Well, let us begin by recognizing that Christianity stands or falls on its confession of this name. Whatever humanistic critics may say, or however one may react to Christian fundamentalism, it remains that Christianity is by definition committed to the confession that Jesus is the Christ.

I cannot improve on the way that this was stated by my great teacher Paul Tillich, whom no one could accuse of being a right-wing theologian! Tillich, in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*, writes:

Christianity is what it is through the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth, who has been called “the Christ,” is actually the Christ, he who brings the new state of things, the New Being. Wherever the assertion that Jesus is the Christ is maintained, there is the Christian message; wherever this message is denied, the Christian message is not affirmed. Christianity was born, not with the birth of the man who is called “Jesus,” but in the moment in which one of his followers was driven to say to him, “Thou art the Christ.” And Christianity will live as long as there are people who repeat this assertion.... The Gospel, reduced to its simplest form...is the statement that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ.³

Within the confession that Jesus is the Christ (and it is a confession, not a fact of scientific investigation) there is, of course, a great deal of room for interpretation. There always has been. Mark’s theology of the Christ is not quite Matthew’s; John’s mystical Christology is different from Paul’s more historical-scriptural approach, and so forth. Interpretation is both varied and reflective of the differing personalities and historical contexts of the interpreters. But whenever people start wanting to have Christianity without

Jesus as the Christ, they beg the question of their own identity as Christians. Why bother with the name “Christian” if the name from which that nomenclature derives is no longer significant for one? Christianity is not just a moral system or a worldview; it is a faith. And at the center of this faith stands the figure of the crucified one whose Spirit calls the disciple community into being. This is minimal; this is basic.

But this confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ must not be turned into the kind of single-minded fixation on Jesus Christ that knows no other dimension of the being and acting of God. Christianity is centered in Jesus Christ—it is “Christocentric.” But it is not “Christomonistic.”⁴ That is, it is not exclusively or narrowly Jesus Christ with which this faith tradition concerns itself. The reality that we call “God” is a mystery transcending even what we know of God through God’s self-manifestation in the Christ; and no testimony to God’s transcendence is more compelling than that of Jesus himself. As I once heard Bishop J.A.T. Robinson put it (and I think the formulation is clarifying), “Jesus is not all the God of God there is.”

One of the finest theologians ever to have emerged in North American history, H. Richard Niebuhr, feared that in far too much American Christianity Jesus was, however, being presented precisely as “all the God of God there is.” It was Niebuhr’s informed sense that popular Christianity—especially in the United States—had been reduced to what he called a “unitarianism of the second person of the Trinity.” God the Father and God the Spirit are pushed into the background by a conception of the Christ that is so all-embracing that it requires no other reference. In many versions of the Christian message on this continent, where media-driven religion reduces everything to simplistic slogans, Jesus is simply presented as God. The declaration “Jesus is God” can be heard with great regularity every day of the week, twenty-four hours a day.

This is nothing short of a failure of Trinitarian theology. The only people in the early and developing church who indulged in the bald and unqualified declaration that “Jesus is God” were declared to be heretics: sabellians, monophysites, docetists, and the like. Yet this kind of ultra-divine Jesus, replacing God and himself virtually devoid of any real humanity, has nearly become the new orthodoxy for popular Christianity in our midst. And of course it begets an equally extreme reaction, so that we have the resurgence of a kind of ultra-liberalism, that in the name of Jesus’ humanity tends to rob this name of any transcendent significance.

H. Richard Niebuhr’s approach maintains Jesus’ transcendent significance for Christian faith without indulging in exaggerated and unbiblical

declarations concerning his deity. Jesus, said Niebuhr, reveals God to faith. His relationship to the Creator (“the Father”), however it may be spelled out, should not have the effect of dispensing with “the Father” in favor of “the Son.” Jesus himself certainly did not put himself forward in that way, but, as the author of Philippians phrased it so memorably, though he could claim identity with God, he “humbled himself and became obedient, even to the point of death on the cross” (Philippians 2:8).

Why is it so important that Christians today and tomorrow should recover this Trinitarian conception of the centrality of the Christ? It is important in the first place because it seems far closer to the original testimony of the earliest church, the church prior to its establishment; for we have to realize that the church’s pronouncements about the Christ after Constantine’s adoption of this faith were serving political and not only theological ends. As the religion of empire, Christianity was under a certain obligation to present its central symbol, the Christ, in as grandiose a manner as possible. Not the suffering Messiah, the crucified “man of sorrows,” representative of a Creator who suffers with the groaning creation, but rather a glorious and heroic figure, God incognito, elevated to ultimate power after a brief humiliation: that is the kind of Christ who serves the purposes of empire. The Christian future calls for a recovery of the earlier Christology, prior to Christendom’s false and misleading elevation of Jesus. The truth is, surely, that Christendom made Jesus so high and mighty that it effectively undid the gospel’s declaration of his being “God with us”—Emmanuel. In the name of upholding Christ’s divinity, imperial Christianity effectively diminished the central New Testament teaching of the Incarnation.

But besides being truer to the original, the Trinitarian conception of the Christ proposed by Niebuhr is terribly important for any possibility of a Christian mission that today includes (as it must!) dialogue with other religious faiths. In this social context, where we brush shoulders daily with persons of other religious persuasions, the glorious, powerful Christ-of-Christendom can only offend and alienate these others. St. Paul rightly insists that there is an “offense”—a scandal—in the Christian message. But the scandal Paul has in mind is not the idea of a powerful messiah who in the very grandeur of his person excludes and humiliates others; rather, it is the scandal of a messiah who, contrary to everybody’s expectations of divinity, enters into complete solidarity with the suffering world and seeks to change the world, not by force, but by the weakness of his radical compassion—*agape*.

In our kind of global village, as Marshall McLuhan called it, triumphalistic, exclusivistic claims for Jesus Christ on the part of Christ's less compassionate followers can only lead to greater human discord and, increasingly, to global violence. By comparison with the arrogance of a Christological dogma that insists on being endorsed by all who can have any part in salvation, the conclusion of H. Richard Niebuhr seems to me closer both to truth and to love, as Christians understand these. Niebuhr wrote,

I do not have the evidence which allows me to say that the miracle of faith in God is worked only by Jesus Christ and that it is never given to people outside the sphere of his working, though I may say that where I note its presence I posit the presence of something like Jesus Christ.⁵

I conclude, then: we are indeed bound to a confession of faith that is centered in Jesus, the Christ. But we shall only engage our world at the level of its reality and its deepest longings if we come to realize that Jesus Christ, in his living personhood, is far more accessible to suffering humanity than are most of our inherited doctrines of Jesus Christ, and that he is already present in our culture in many ways and in places where he is not explicitly named. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the future that awaits thoughtful and sensitive Christians today is found just here. For, as Bishop Richard Holloway expressed it, "The fascinating thing about our day is that, as the political and theological structures of Christendom crash down before our eyes, we can see once again, through the rubble and dust of the centuries, a clearer picture of the prophet of Nazareth."⁶ Note well: it is Jesus that we see through the dust and rubble, not the formula of Chalcedon or the Nicene Creed!⁷

The Being and Purpose of Humankind

The second area of Christian teaching that demands fresh and critical thinking today and that can help us into the future as a faithful and prophetic people is Christian anthropology. If as Christians we want to engage our culture, and not just reflect it, we shall have to submit to a profound rethinking of what it means to be human—truly, authentically human. And in particular we shall have to ask, What is the human vocation in a biosphere of diverse and delicately interrelated creatures and processes?

In a way, this area of Christian doctrine is more vital, ontologically and ethically, even than Christology—though it is also inextricably bound up with our understanding of Jesus Christ, whose humanity, after all, represents for Christians a paradigm of what Chalcedon called *vere homo*, true humanity, genuine humanity. Christology remains central, but our anthropology as Christians is quite directly and immediately paramount for our engagement of our culture today. For we find ourselves in a world where nothing is more confusing to human beings than is their own species. What our civilization taught us to call *homo sapiens* (the wise creature!) is today under serious threat—from within. “We have met the enemy, and it is us!” We began the twentieth century with an unprecedentedly high image of ourselves as a species, a promethean image; we ended the century with Sisyphus, the Greek mythological figure condemned to meaningless and endless busy-ness. What is being questioned, in fact, is whether there is any sort of human “being” distinguishable from other sorts of beings, and even if there is, whether such beings as humans may be said to have any real purpose.

One of the most perceptive authors of our geographic context states that the question by which we are confronted today, phrased in its most rudimentary form, is simply, What are people for? That is, in fact, the title of a remarkable book of essays by Wendell Berry, the American philosopher and essayist. In the title essay of that book, Berry relates that “a psychologist who has frequently worked with the juvenile courts in a large midwestern [American] city, has told me that a major occupation of the police force there is to keep the ‘permanently unemployable’ confined to their own part of the town.” “One wonders,” muses Berry, “what the authors of our constitution would have thought of that category, ‘permanently unemployable.’” And he comments,

The great question that hovers over this issue, one that we have dealt with mainly by indifference, is the question of what people are for. Is their greatest dignity in unemployment? Is the obsolescence of human beings now a social goal? One would conclude so from our attitude towards work, especially the manual work necessary to the long-term preservation of the land, and from our rush toward mechanization, automation, and computerization. In a country that puts an absolute premium on labor-saving measures, short workdays, and retirement, why should there be any surprise at the permanence of

unemployment and welfare-dependency? These [apparently] are only different names for our national ambition!⁸

Berry, in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, lives close to the land and laments the displacement of people by complex machinery. But other thinkers contemplate (some of them with glee!) a world in which the messy, unpredictable human element has been supplemented, or perhaps replaced, by yet more complex machinery. Let me quote a few lines from an essay by one, Ray Kurzweil, a leading American technologist. His essay “When Machines Think” was published in *MacLean’s Magazine* in 1999.

While ordinary humans like us have to acquire knowledge “painstakingly,” says Kurzweil (and please note the language he uses), “if one computer learns a skill or gains an insight, it can immediately share that wisdom with billions of other computers. So every computer can be a master of all human- and machine-acquired knowledge.” As we progress through the twenty-first century, he insists, the clear distinction between human and machine will increasingly disappear. “By 2030,” Kurzweil calculates, “it will take a village of human brains to match a \$1,000 computer. By 2055, a thousand dollars of computing will equal the processing power of all human brains on Earth. O.K. [he modestly admits!], I may be off a year or two.” Kurzweil asks,

Will these future machines be capable of having spiritual experiences? Oh, they’ll certainly claim to. They will claim to be people, and to have the full range of emotional and spiritual experiences that people claim to have. And these will not be idle claims; they will evidence the sort of rich complex behaviour that one associates with these feelings. How do the claims and behaviours—compelling as they will be—relate to the subjective experiences of these reinstated people? We keep coming back to the very real but ultimately unmeasurable issue of consciousness.⁹

Well, at least this technocrat seems ready to admit (for the time being) that (in his words) “consciousness presents something of a problem”; but what is one to make of the equation, in his discussion, of “data” and “information” with “knowledge,” “insight,” and even “wisdom”? And what of the equation of electronically “processing” this information with “thinking”? Is everybody ready to accept such equations?

Unfortunately, it would seem large numbers of our contemporaries are prepared to do so, or at least they raise no questions about such prognoses as Kurzweil's. Most people today are so overwhelmed by the marvels of technology, and so out of touch with what the founding cultures of our civilization (both Jerusalem and Athens) meant by such terms as "reason," "revelation," "thinking," "knowledge," "insight," "wisdom," and a whole host of concepts associated with what it is that human beings at their best are "for," that they fail to hear any alarm bells in such analyses as Kurzweil's. The equation of information with knowledge and wisdom, an equation articulated daily and hourly in our media-driven society, seems not to concern most of our fellow citizens, including most alleged intellectuals. When thinking is equated with calculating and manipulating myriad "data," computers already have the advantage over our ponderous human brains. So there is a silent—but not so very silent—suspicion among us today that human beings are embarrassingly unimpressive—except perhaps as creators of those clever machines that seem poised to replace us. And one suspects that the callous treatment of the young in our society, which Professor Harold Recinos addresses in this publication in his lecture "Youth Ministry in a Harder Country," is just an extension of the low estimate of humanity generally in our technologically fixated society.

One of my favorite authors, Kurt Vonnegut, that American literary seer whose ironic humor often hides from the unperceptive his prophetic insight, once wrote a sort of parable about this situation. To my mind, it says everything. Situating his vignette in a fictional planet he calls Tralfamadore, Vonnegut writes,

Once upon a time on Tralfamadore there were creatures who weren't anything like machines. They weren't dependable. They weren't efficient. They weren't predictable. They weren't durable. And these poor creatures were obsessed by the idea that everything that existed had to have a purpose and that some purposes were higher than others.

These creatures spent most of their time trying to find out what their purpose was. And every time they found what seemed to be a purpose of themselves, the purpose seemed so low that the creatures were filled with disgust and shame.

And rather than serve such a low purpose, the creatures would make a machine to serve it. This left the creatures free to serve higher

purposes. But whenever they found a higher purpose, the purpose still wasn't high enough.

So machines were made to serve higher purposes, too.

And the machines did everything so expertly that they were finally given the job of finding out what the highest purposes of the creatures could be.

The machines reported in all honesty that the creatures couldn't really be said to have any purpose at all.

The creatures thereupon began slaying each other, because they hated purposelessness above all else.

And they discovered that they weren't even very good at slaying. So they turned that job over to the machines, too. And the machines finished up the job in less time than it takes to say Tralfamadore.¹⁰

That last line always reminds me of Jacques Ellul's observation in his great study of *The Technological Society*: "Nothing equals the perfection of our war machines."

Christianity, whatever else may be said of it, has a very high conception of human being and purpose. This fact is sometimes obscured by the negative aspects of traditional, theological anthropology, which, unfortunately, some historical theological traditions have accentuated much too one-sidedly. But the doctrine of sin ends in anthropological pessimism only if it is isolated from the perspectives on the human condition that derive from the doctrines of creation and redemption. Sin, in fact, confirms the high anthropology of the tradition of Jerusalem; for it insists that what is intended—what humanity has fallen from, and what must be and is being restored to it—is an essence and a vocation of the highest order. The human being is described biblically as the special creation of God—not as being better than the rest of nature, but certainly different, and with a special "stewardly" role within the creaturely sphere. The human being in this tradition is in covenant partnership with God—is the thinking, choosing, planning, responding dialogue partner of the Creator for the sake of all the other creatures and, as such, is the object of divine pathos and suffering love.

It therefore belongs to any honest and wise representation of the Judeo-Christian estimate of the human to resist any reduction of human beings, old

or young, to random, superfluous, and purposeless things. And if there are Christians who are at this moment reveling ecstatically in the wonders of cybernetics, then they had better be helped to realize that the complex gadgetry they are too thoughtlessly celebrating is the product of a mindset that is very different from that of the Psalmist who wrote, “When I consider the heavens...what is man that thou art mindful of him?”

I do not advocate that everyone who professes Christianity should be a Luddite (though the story of the Luddites is seldom told with any sympathy); but to go along without a thought, without a question, with what is occurring under the vainglorious nomenclature of “communications” is to display a naïveté unworthy of both Socrates and Christ.

Eventually, and at long last, Christians are going to have to come to terms with the technological threat to their whole system of belief and to the culture at large. Naively, too many Christians have imagined that science is their enemy. But science, in its profoundest expressions, both knows its own limits and lives intimately with the mystery of ultimate truth. It is not science, but technology—the profligate and amoral and usually profit-driven offspring of science—that poses the threat, and it is an extraordinary threat wherever human beings who ought to have been and could have been more critically vigilant have lost touch with their own sources of critical insight. If the churches were half as excited about the threat to civilization posed by a communications industry in the hands of a hundred multinational corporations as they are about gay and lesbian ordination, they might have something genuinely prophetic to say to our North American society.

As Christians, we are stewards of an ancient wisdom—yes, wisdom—that believes in the meaningfulness of creation, including the trouble-making creature that is its articulate center, because it believes in a loving God who suffers with and for creation. It is precisely this wisdom that our culture desperately needs. The drift toward purposelessness, and the self-destruction that attends that drift, can only be stemmed by those who remember, and are touched by, images of the human that are older than the flashy, technocratic image that Western modernity pursued so single-mindedly. Among those who remember the older conceptions of the human, Christians and Jews ought to be—and could be—prominent. And if we pursue faithfully and imaginatively our own biblical traditions of anthropological hope, we shall certainly find others, of other faiths, with whom we can make common cause. We would come to realize, for instance, that the most serious among thoughtful

Muslims today are not so much protesting “the West” as they are protesting the rampant technologism and consumerism that has captured Western peoples and inspired them to transform the globe through their bogus religions of technique and consumption.

The Church and Its Mission

A third area of Christian theology where greater clarity and intentionality must, I think, be achieved if the church of the future is to engage our culture theologically is, of course, our own self-understanding as church, and our mission as such. Who are we, and what is our mandate, our vocation? This is such an immense field of discourse that I shall have to limit myself to two basic observations: one about the being, the other about the mission of the church.

The first is this: Surely the Christian community that is being edged out of its entrenched position as part of the dominant culture must try to recover something of the dynamic or fluid or organic nature of the church that reflects biblical testimony to the Body of Christ. No matter how we may try to base our various ecclesiastical structures and polities on biblical precedent, it remains that the early Christians did not think (as we are prone to do) institutionally. They thought of themselves as a movement. To be sure, they had to organize themselves; and before the establishment in the fourth century there were various systems, including organized ministry, in place. But Christianity as institution and, after the Reformation, as a whole spate of separate and competing institutions, does not belong to the original concept. The commanding metaphor in the pre-Constantinian church was the metaphor of movement. They saw themselves as a *communio viatorum*, a “people of the Way,” a community in transit, en route.

It is a fascinating image: to be *in via* is to exist in a frame of mind quite different from that of the institution. Everything is geared toward movement. The goal lies ahead, so you know you have not yet arrived—you are only on the way. You hope it is the right way, but you do not have certitude about that—the certitude of those who think they have “arrived.” Confidence you may have, but not certitude.

Moreover, Christian community as movement involves a quite different form of belonging than does the religious institution. In the institution you belong by going through the various stages of membership, paying your dues, learning your lines, committing yourself to the upkeep of properties (because institutions always require a lot of property), contributing to the salaries of

those who serve the institution full time (as we say), and so forth. In the movement, on the contrary, belonging is through participation. There will undoubtedly be ceremonial and financial and housekeeping responsibilities, but the measure of your belonging is located in the breadth and depth of your involvement in the faith that has inspired all these things, and the worldly commitment that is its ethical consequence.

As in any movement, the Christian movement permits participation that is greater or lesser in extent. Some, in any movement, are at the center, some are the avant-garde, some are in the rearguard, some are only watching the parade from the sidelines—though they may at any moment join in, depending upon what they see and hear. There is, in short, a fluidity, a back-and-forthness here between the Christian community and the surrounding culture. The lines of distinction are not drawn indelibly between the avowedly sacred and the apparently secular.

Something like this ancient metaphor of movement needs to be recovered, I think, if the Christian movement is to find its way into the future beyond the impasse of institutional Christianity. Precisely because membership is no longer automatic; precisely because decision is involved now in a new and existential and ongoing manner; precisely because faith is and will be sustained, not by tokens of institutional identity but by disciplined thinking and concrete commitment, the institutional model of the church no longer fits the realities of the post-Christendom era. Perhaps if ecumenism were less concerned about the union of tired, old institutions and more concerned about the calling of the Christian movement in the world as a whole, ecumenicity itself would be more vital to all who take this faith with some degree of seriousness. Perhaps, too, the world would manifest more curiosity about a church less concerned about buildings and numbers and its own survival and more vulnerable to the suffering that affects all creaturely life.

The second point is, What about the mission of a post-Constantinian Christian movement, a diaspora church? Here, we would do well to consider the metaphors that Jesus actually applied to his “little flock” and its worldly purpose—metaphors that have played far too little role in the ecclesiastical reflections of Christendom for the obvious reason that they are not metaphors of power and majority status! The disciple community, said Jesus, is to be “salt,” “yeast,” “light,” a “city set on a hill” (before the age of electricity!). These are not grandiose images of Christ’s church. They are descriptions of little things—but little things that have to do with quality, not quantity; and

little things that do something for big things: salt that seasons an otherwise insipid plate of McFood, yeast that causes the cultural dough to rise a little higher, light that persists in illuminating dark places.

After the existence of Christendom for some fifteen hundred years as the dominant cult of the dominant culture of the West, such images as these seem paltry to the mindset that thinks the only way to influence a culture is to turn the whole of it into church! We are so humiliated today by the decrease in membership, finances, and influence in high places that we seem impervious to the challenge to genuine mission contained in these simple metaphors of Jesus' teaching. We tend to assume that we could be about the work of God in the world only by achieving a majority status and making a great deal of noise. This is quite contrary to the Bible's wisdom, which knows not only that minorities matter greatly, but that majorities should nearly always be regarded with high suspicion. In the election theology of Scripture, only minorities can do what majorities never have done and never will do—such as being vigilant in behalf of the victims of the majorities (and majorities—including allegedly Christian majorities—always create victims!).

This is not, I think, a time for aggressive evangelism. "Been there, done that!" But the alternative to aggressive evangelism is not passivity. There are ways of expressing Christian faith and discipleship that do not falsely offend and humiliate other people, or substitute a quest for power for a quest for truth, justice, peace, and love. Most of these ways have to do with what may be called the befriending of the world—the compassionate caring for human and other creatures and processes that is signified by the foundational category of Christian ethics, *agape*—suffering love. Such "befriending," whether on the part of individuals or of the church as a whole, is not just a means to the end of explicit Christian witnessing. It is in itself enough that such work is done, such compassion shown, such justice undertaken. But if it is done with sufficient consistency, wisdom, and human sincerity, it will raise in some people—in enough people—the question, "Why?" For to express real hope in concrete ways in our overtly and covertly despairing world is to invite that question. Genuine hope—hope in word and deed—does not explain itself. As the first epistle of Peter says, true hope begs to be accounted for.

The mission of the Christian movement in the West during the twenty-first century will have to be confined largely to that kind of creative indirectness. We Christians, who have imposed ourselves and our faith on so many for so long, must now earn the right to explain the reason for our hope.

Normally, no doubt with exceptions, we shall have to wait to be invited by our world to say who we are and why we are doing what we are doing. But that, in the end, may prove a far more lasting and faithful testimony to the God of Bethel and of Bethlehem than all the forced baptisms, tent-meeting conversions, and proselytizing bombast of the centuries.

In conclusion, I personally can think of no more stirring and energizing time in which to live the Christian life—or (remembering Chesterton) seriously to try to do so—than right now. We stand at the far end of a form of the church that was based on the quest for power. We know, if we are observant, that power does not serve the ends of a God whose way is that of love. The way of love is “difficult,” as Chesterton rightly affirmed, and we would be naive were we to imagine otherwise. But it can be undertaken—“tried”—today and tomorrow by a chastened church that has found out how very inadequate and misleading is the way of power.

So, casting the ballast of the centuries overboard and setting the sails of the ship of church into the gusty winds of the twenty-first century after Christ, your generation may go far. I hope you do so. Bon voyage!

Notes

1. G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (London: Cassel, 1910), 22.
2. I assume the distinction, made by Bonhoeffer, Barth, and many others, between “religion” and “faith.” While faith may never be found without some “religious” wrapping, it is necessary intellectually and spiritually to distinguish the two. Religion is a “grasping” (Barth); faith is being grasped.
3. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 97.
4. Dorothee Soelle used to say that she found much Christianity in North America a kind of Christo-fascism.
5. H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reformation: The Continuing Imperative,” *The Christian Century* LXXVII (1960): 249.
6. Richard Holloway, *Doubts and Loves: What Is Left of Christianity?* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), 172.
7. I mean no disparagement of either; but we need to remember that before “Christology” there was Jesus, called the Christ by the fisherman Peter.
8. Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 124–25.
9. Ray Kurzweil, “When Machines Think” *MacLean's Magazine* (1999).
10. Kurt Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* (New York: Dell Book, 1970), 274–75.