

## **It's a Whole New World**

*A Course on Church and Culture in a New Time*

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### **Introduction**

Congregations do not exist in a vacuum. Congregations live and serve in cultural settings and historical eras. While the gospel is centered in Jesus Christ who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13: 8), cultural contexts do change. Such changes call for faithful and creative response on the part of congregations and their leaders.

As we begin to explore what this means for us today, consider this: we would all agree that we do not live in the medieval world. Today many claim that we no longer live in the modern world or in a culture called “modernity.” If that is true, what world, what culture, do we live today in North America? That is the first question we shall explore in this course. The second question is: so what? What are the implications of our cultural context, and changes in that context, for the mission and witness of the church today? I invite you explore these two critical questions with me in, “It’s a Whole New World.”

This course is arranged in four parts. The first part of our conversation about church and culture I focus on the change in our culture from American Christendom to the secular and pluralistic culture of North America in the twenty-first century. Part two turns to the hallmarks of the modern era and the characteristics of the emerging post-modern era. In part three, I look briefly at the dynamics of organizations, of which religious congregations are one form. In the concluding section, section four, I focus on implications. What do the changes in culture mean for us in the church? How are we to respond in ways which are faithful? At the conclusion of each part you will find questions for reflection or discussion. Following the four sections, a bibliography lists printed and on-line resources.

I will be painting with a broad brush. That is to say, there are “fine brush” particulars of

your congregation that I will not address, but I hope that you will. For example, every congregation has its specific community setting as well its own story of how it has related to it. Moreover, congregations have been influenced by Christendom and modernity in different ways. The experience of predominantly African-American congregations and predominantly Anglo congregations may, for example, be quite different. I trust you will illuminate these important variables. For now, let's turn to the larger cultural context, beginning with Christendom.

## **Part One: Christendom**

"Christendom" is a word that comes from joining two words, "Christian" and "dominion." Christendom began to take shape when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century A. D. This was a big policy shift on the part of the Empire, which had alternated between persecuting Christians and the church and simply hoping they would go away. It was, arguably, an even bigger change for the church itself. Imagine going from being on the "outs" socially to suddenly being at the center of the in-group! Imagine being a political non-entity for years and waking up one day to find you are a U.S. Senator!

It is not that one is right and the other wrong; it is that they are different, very different. As Christendom developed, church and state were increasingly allied and Christianity and culture interwoven. During the reign of a subsequent Emperor, Charlemagne, the now "Holy Roman Empire," (Western Europe) was divided into parishes, geographical areas within earshot of the church bells. Each parish had a parish church and a parish priest. People were members of the church because they were born and lived there. The parish church and priest provided religious services to the citizenry of their territory. The role and obligation of Christians was to support and maintain the institution of the church, which in turn served the religious needs of the citizens. The "mission field" lay far away, beyond the borders of the empire. Within the empire's borders western culture was considered a "Christian civilization." One result of this is that Christianity and western culture became increasingly identified as two inextricable parts of one whole: Christendom.

In the "new world" of North America, Christendom was both different and similar to its

European version. It was different because the new nation was founded on, among other things, separation of church and state. Unlike European countries, citizens were not taxed to support the church and the church was not legally established. But while Christianity in North America was not a legally established religion, it was culturally established. The new American nation was culturally Christian and the church enjoyed cultural support and sanction. For example, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century before stores began to be open on Sundays in most North American towns. This was a subtle but powerful form of support for the Christian churches and their day of worship. Still today, political leaders take their oath of office with their hand on the Bible, another sign of cultural Christendom.

Sometime around the middle of the twentieth century a number of factors combined to stimulate a tremendous change in North American culture. What had been a culture where Christian religion and churches (especially Protestant mainline churches) enjoyed support and privilege as part of a Christian culture, became increasingly a secular (not officially religious), pluralistic (many religions) and diverse (many cultures and languages) society.

What factors contributed to this change? Many to be sure, but among the most important were 1) modernity and its emphasis on reason and tolerance, 2) the influx of new immigrants from non-European nations bringing faiths other than Christianity, 3) the shift of authority from external sources to the individual, and 4) the growth of a consumer culture with its emphasis on individual freedom and choice.

The result, as we begin a new century, is a society which is dramatically different from the one in which many of us, and many of our churches, learned to be and do church. Ours is no longer so clearly a culturally Christian society. The mainline Protestant churches, once the religious center or establishment of that Christian society, are no longer so prominent or powerful. You might even say that religion, like airlines and phone companies, has been "de-regulated." Today American is a land of many faiths (Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age, Mormon, Catholic and Protestant Christian) as well as no religious faith at all. Moreover, in a global perspective, the weight of the church has shifted. Once centered in Western Europe and America, Christianity is today growing most rapidly in non-western societies in Africa and Asia, while it has declined dramatically in the West.

Still, it is important to be clear on this point: What we are seeing is the end of American Christendom. This is not the same as the end of Christianity. Indeed, it may be a new beginning! Because the culture is no longer nominally Christian, and the church is no longer allied with dominant powers and the cultural status quo, there is not only change, but opportunity. In many ways, the church in North America today may have more in common with the early church of the first four centuries, the church before Constantine set the Christendom ball rolling. Once again, the church has the opportunity to be what Jesus called it to be, "salt for the earth" and "leaven (yeast) for the loaf." Let me summarize some of the key changes that flow from the end of Christendom as we once knew it.

- We can no longer assume that everyone in America is a Christian simply by virtue of growing up here and being a citizen.
- The mission field has moved. During Christendom the mission field was at the border of the empire. Today it is at the door or your church (maybe even inside your sanctuary).
- The task of the church is not limited to providing for the religious needs of its members and assisting society's less fortunate, but to witness to the gospel by being and making disciples (followers) of Jesus Christ.
- One way to sum this up is to say that during Christendom the focus was on supporting and maintaining the church as an institution and organization. "Mission" lay far away in distant lands. Today it's different. Every congregation is, at least potentially, a mission outpost, an instrument of God's grace and presence in a "mission field" called North America.

This means, as it was expressed in one recent book, "The mission field is right here. Being missional means being Christians who are 'getting out into the community, connecting with the people who are there, finding out what the needs are, how the gospel is going to connect and speak to their lives and even having that shape the style of worship . . .'" (Extraordinary Leaders in Extraordinary Times, Eerdmans, 2006) Contrast this with a Christendom approach that thinks of the church as chiefly offering programs for its members, doing some local charity work, and leaving mission to "missionaries" serving far away.

And now for something really different—thinking of each congregation as a “mission outpost” means that we can no longer think of the church as “for ourselves” and mission as “for others,” as many tended to do during Christendom. The “for ourselves” and “for others” way of thinking is a false and unhelpful dichotomy. The church is not “for us” and mission “for others.” The church belongs to God and is God’s people being and doing God’s mission in every aspect of its life, whether worship or teaching, forming small groups or ministries of service in the community and in the world! If your head and heart are now spinning, that’s good! The end of Christendom’s 1600 year run brings loss and confusion. It also brings new opportunity and promise.

*Part One: Questions for Reflection and Discussion:*

1. Besides stores being closed on Sunday, identify other specific ways that American society supported and sanctioned the church during Christendom.
2. Name some characteristics of church life during Christendom that you loved and the loss of which causes you grief.
3. Do you find it exciting or distressing that I describe the idea of the church being “for ourselves” and mission as “for others” as a “false and unhelpful dichotomy”?
4. Name two positives or opportunities you see for the church in the end of American Christendom.
5. In what specific ways can you imagine your congregational becoming more “missional” in its orientation and style?