

Hall's Prescription

The Christendom phase of the Christian movement is drawing to a decisive close. Why are we so thoroughly wedded to Christendom that we refuse to entertain consciously this great transition through which we are passing, and therefore fail to engage in the kind of radical assessment and reforming of our calling, our mission, our structure and ministries that would enable us to pass through this paradigm shift with greater self-understanding and a more faithful and imaginative kind of obedience? Most Christian denominations and congregations in our context are trying to behave as if nothing had happened – as if we are still living in a basically Christian civilization; as if the Christian religion were still quite obviously the official religion of the official culture; as if we could carry on baptizing, marrying, and burying everybody as we have always done; as if government would listen to us, and educational institutions would respect us, and the general public would heed our moral and other pronouncement.

Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 19-20

Many denominations mount specific programs to deal with this or that “new” issue; but few want to pay attention to the big issue, which is whether this imperial form of the Christian religion can even survive – or should. A sort of repressed or suppressed sense of failure eats away at the denominations, often manifesting itself openly in economic and leadership crisis. We go on with schemes to keep the status quo going as long as possible. 21

The church’s purpose is to be a fellowship, a “friendly church.” In cities and towns that are large and impersonal, the church is a meeting place where people “get to know one another” and to “care.”... There should be outreach into the surrounding community, and social programs, and involvement in current ethical and social issues. 24 Christians are called not only to serve their neighbors but to confess their faith – their reasons for serving; and from that perspective it must be admitted that, just here, we are close to the center of the problem. How shall the churches be *communities of Christ’s discipleship*? – not only of *fellowship*, but of discipleship? 25

“Church growth” belongs to the mentality of the business and professional world – and of capitalism – which is based on the idea of growth. So the application of the growth concept to diminishing congregations can seem the most obvious way of rectifying their problems. Members of such congregations understand these tactics well, for they are part of the world to which the members belong – Christendom model. The great advantage of this approach is that it demands nothing at all by way of rethinking of the vocation of the

church. It simply applies to the dominant model of the past contemporary techniques for achieving the same result, or better. 27

[Few Christians seem ready to let go of the Constantinian model of the church. 28](#)

Although there are significant minorities in all the liberal and moderate denominations of Protestantism who are seeking alternative ways of conceiving of the nature and purpose of the church, the majority appear prepared to attempt to carry on business as usual. 29

In North America, Christ and culture are so subtly intertwined, so inextricably connected at the subconscious or unconscious level, that we hardly know where one leave off and the other begins. The substance of faith and the substance of our cultural values and morality appear, to most real or nominal Christians in the United States and Canada, virtually synonymous. 31

According to the recent study *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, “most of the denominations that dominated America’s religious life before the Civil War (Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists) are in decline” (Kee et al. 1991: 731). Between the years 1940 and 1986, there was an increase in the population of the United States from 130 million to over 240 million, a rise of 83 percent. “Denominations defined by their European origins – for example, Lutherans and Mennonites – have grown at rates roughly comparable to the rise in population.³⁷

[To see the modern world from the point of view of a parent is to see it in the worst possible light. This perspective unmistakably reveals the unwholesomeness of our way of life: our obsession with sex, violence, and the pornography of “making it”; our addictive dependence on drugs, “entertainment,” and the evening news; our impatience with anything that limits our sovereign freedom of choice, especially with the constraints of material and familial ties; our preference for “nonbinding commitment”; our third-rate educational system; our third-rate morality; our refusal to draw a distinction between right and wrong, lest we “impose” our morality on others; our reluctance to judge or be judged; our indifference to the needs of future generations, as evidenced by our willingness to saddle them with a huge national debt, and overgrown arsenal of destruction, and a deteriorating environment; our unstated assumption, which underlies so much of the propaganda for unlimited abortion, that only those children born for success ought to be allowed to be born at all. 58.](#)

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[Christianity has arrived at the end of its sojourn as the official, or established, religion of the Western world. The churches resist coming to terms with this ending. But in Christian thinking, endings can also be beginning. 51 The opportunity that comes to serious Christians at the very point where Christianity seems to be in decline is an opportunity that has seldom presented itself in Christian history: namely, the opportunity actually to become the salt, yeast, and light that the newer Testament speaks of as the](#)

character of Christ's disciple community. To grasp this opportunity, however, we must relinquish our centuries-old ambition to be the official religion, the dominant religion, of the dominant culture. Ideationally, we must disengage ourselves from our society if we are going to reengage our society at the level of truth, justice, and love. 49

Divine providence is offering us another possibility, a new form, indeed a new life. But we may accept this gift of the new only as we relinquish the old to which we are stubbornly clinging. We may reform ourselves according to the new form that is God's possibility for us only as we intentionally relinquish the social status that belongs to our past: the comfortable relationship with governments and ruling classes; the continuous confirmation of accepted social values and mores by means of which we sustain those relationships; the espousal of "charities" that ease our guilty conscience while allowing us to maintain neutrality with respect to the social structure that make such "charities" necessary; the silent acceptance of racial, sexual, gender, and economic injustices, or their trivialization through tokenism; the failure to probe the depths of human and creaturely pathos by confining sin to petty immorality or doctrinal refinements drawn from the past, and so on. 42 If we disengage *ourselves*; if with courage and trust we release our hold on what we have been conditioned to believe was our right, or an immutable form of the church; if, to see a newer Testamental image, we lose our life, ecclesiastically speaking, then we may in fact gain our life as Christ's living body. 42-43.

Christian disengagement from the dominant culture is not to be confused with the abandonment of that culture. The end that we are to seek is the redemption of our world - the world that is truly ours and of which we are ourselves part. Our Lord's metaphors for his community of witness were all of them modest one; a little salt, a little yeast, a little light. Christendom tried to be great, large, magnificent. It thought *itself* the object of God's expansive grace; it forgot the meaning of its election to *worldly* responsibility. 65-66.