

## The Disciples: Mainlined, Sidelined or Derailed?

Clark M. Williamson

It is no secret that the "mainline" Protestant denominations are declining and that proportion of the population called the "nones" and the "dones" are on the increase. Participating Disciples in North America are now said to number about 296,000, whereas when I was a House scholar, the number was two million and a few hundred thousand. Anyway we look at it, this is a precipitous drop.

"Mainline" is a metaphor from railroading, where a "mainline" is distinct from a branch line. The railroading metaphor leads us to ask whether we have been sidelined or derailed. Or are we the caboose, simply following the rest of the cultural train?

Sociological and cultural anthropological students of the church have seen this coming for some time, at least since the 1960's. And they have been trying to alert the churches as to some, at least, of the reasons, that is, reasons about which we could do something. Theologians also have chimed in on the effort to help these churches.<sup>1</sup> There are various contributing factors about which we can do nothing, but there are two factors about which we can do something.

Jeffrey Hadden, for instance, argued that this crisis had the potential to disrupt the very nature of the church. He saw it as a crisis of belief because the laity had not been engaged in the theological effort of reinterpreting the Christian faith for a new situation. And it was also a crisis of authority, specifically that of the clergy.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Langdon Gilkey, *How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself* (New York: Harper & Row), 1964 and Martin E. Marty, *The Fire We Can Light* (Garden City: NY: Doubleday & Co.), 1979; Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *The Teaching Minister* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991).

Ministers, he argued, had lost their authority as authentic teachers of the Christian faith because they had not exercised it.<sup>2</sup>

All these scholars, Jeffery Hadden, Dean M. Kelley, Thomas Luckmann, William McKinney and Wade Clark Roof agreed that the indispensable service of a religion is to help its members make sense of their earthly predicament.<sup>3</sup> Human beings are meaning-making beings. We have to understand the world in which we live in order to understand how to live in that world. We can't copy the squirrels and do it by instinct.

Interpreting the meaning of life in ultimate terms and explicating what therefore we are given and called to be and do is what religion is about. This means thinking theologically, something to which Disciples have long been averse. Deep in our DNA is Thomas Campbell's insistence that there are a very few matters on which we should agree and the rest fall under the heading of "opinion." No matter how solid the scholarship, how profound the thinking, it's just your opinion.

Disciples haven't found it important to think theologically before deciding what to do. When and if they do think theologically, or try to, it's often as an afterthought offered to justify what had already been decided on quite other grounds. The result is what Thomas Luckman calls "secularization from within."

Two clues we gather from the various polls are important. One is that we have a smart people problem. The more educated people are, the less likely are they to be involved in church. The second is that most of those who drift away are in agreement

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* (Garden City:N.Y.: Doubleday & Co, 1960), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Thomas Luckmann and Peter L. Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality* 1966 (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company); William McKinney and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Liberal Protestantism: Realities and Possibilities*, 1986 (New York: Pilgrim Press).

with the stands mainline churches take on ethical issues. The result is a leadership/followership gap in which the followers and the leaders are singing from different hymnals. We fail to bring along our constituencies effectively. Mainline churches in their general assemblies take decidedly liberal stances on important issues. But about two thirds of the laity vote decidedly conservative.

What leadership needs to do is to lay out the grounds and warrants that would lend credence to the claim that various stances taken are compatible with or required by Christian faith.

We need to recover the teaching task of ministry. In the Reformation traditions the reason why we have ministers is because we need teachers. And what teachers provide is the leavening of a creative theological focus. For some time we were afflicted by a quasi-therapeutic blandness that was without moral or intellectual focus. This was decidedly unable to resist the forces of radical religious individualism or the kinds of religious conservatism that spell out clear if ridiculous answers in an increasingly bewildering world.

In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln nailed what the theological task is: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew." The scriptures of Israel are written over a span of time that covers several major cultural eras from the bronze age to the Roman age and across an incredible series of historical ups and downs. The people were consistently in a new context with new questions, new challenges, and new strangers. And strangers also bring new questions to us as they often are

questions to us (and we to them). The people always had to contemporize their inherited wisdom in these new and puzzling circumstances.

In doing so, they used five axioms of interpretation: the monotheizing principle, the priestly axiom, the prophetic axiom, the axiom on behalf of the most vulnerable people in society, and fifth, the understanding that God works through human sin and error. There are no moral heroes in the Bible. These axioms worked for them and they can work for us.

They are questions to ask ourselves. The first reminds us to ask ourselves whether we have made our witness or done our theology "*ad maiorem gloria Dei*," to the greater glory of God. The priestly axiom reminds us that we are graciously loved, that God is the God of a singular promise, that we are unconditionally loved. The prophetic axiom, however, reminds us that God's love is for all people everywhere and for all God's creation, all those other species whom we are rapidly making extinct if we haven't already. Our love for them is to take the form of justice. This is the God of the singular command that we love all our neighbors as ourselves. The fourth axiom reminds us that we are to be concerned with the least of these, those in need of food, water, clothing, education, companionship, housing, work. As we do it to them, Jesus reminds us, we do it to him. That God works through human sin and error (*errore hominum providentia divina*) leads us to be more forgiving of the sins and foibles of those who have toiled in the way, and more accepting of ourselves as the forgiven sinners with whom God has to work.

Ask yourself those questions and you'll be doing rather good theology, from which the church will benefit.

Let's return to the priestly axiom and say a word about grace. Often it is reduced to a laser like focus on forgiveness. It's a lot more than that. God's grace is large enough to fill the size of the hole in the human heart. The grace of God is God's empowerment of our liberation from being curved in upon ourselves; God's seeking and finding us as the lost ones; God's benevolent disposition toward and action on behalf of people trapped in evil; God's forgiveness of sin; God's reassuring us as to God's reality and meaning when damnation takes the form of meaninglessness, God's placing us in a community of redemption and reconciliation when abandonment and isolation is the form of human hurt; God's supply of strength when weakness is characteristic of human effort; God's yes in the gospel to every no of the world within, the world among, and the world around; God's presence to us as eternal in the midst of the temporal; God's reassuring presence and life in the awareness of death. Grace is intrinsic in all that God has made. The creation is a vast theater of God's grace. We should care for it. God's grace is made known to us in Jesus Christ, a gift which redeems us from understanding ourselves in any ultimate way other than in terms of the love of God graciously given to us.