Seismic Shifts in the Christian Church

Last week we talked about what I called The Golden Years of the Church. It was a period that began with the end of the World War II and lasted until the early 1960s. I gave a brief history of how our church grew from 800 members to almost 1600 during that time and who were the leaders that set the stage for the coming revolution in religion, in culture and in society. They were Reinhold Niebuhr, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Each made a substantial contribution to the era, but those of Niebuhr and King were of broader significance and ushered in a seismic shift in our culture. Vatican II was convened and in the 1960s the number of Catholics in America was at an all-time high. The election of Kennedy set aside the centuries-old fear of America becoming a puppet state of Rome. The “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963 electrified the nation.

The deaths of Pope John Paul XXIII and President Kennedy truly ended the post-war period, and the next years brought huge changes to the Church. The launching of the Civil Rights legislation by Lyndon Johnson shifted the Democratic south to the Republican camp for generations to come. Catholics and Protestants, blacks and whites thronged the offices of Congress to lobby for the passage of the Civil Rights Act. After the remarkable growth of churches in the preceding decade, for the first time in American history, major church groups started to shrink. Civil rights issues were particularly relevant to what happened in the South but there were many other influences that contributed to the loss of membership in Mainline Protestant and Catholic churches.

All the hopes that were held for continued growth turned to ashes. The membership in Mainline Protestant churches—the Presbyterians, the Lutherans, the Episcopalians, and the Methodists all lost membership. The Presbyterian Church lost 1.5 million members between the mid-1960s and the late 1980s. By the turn of the century there were more Muslims in America than Episcopalians. It wasn’t just about church membership. Applications to seminaries fell sharply, revered publications like The Presbyterian Outlook closed shop. Contributions began to fall, many churches operated in the red, and foreign missions—such a strong part of our Presbyterian heritage—virtually disappeared.

Catholicism had a crisis no less striking. Attendance at mass fell and as Ross Douthat, whose book, Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics we are using as a reference, puts it, “the thick culture that had defined and sustained the pre-Vatican II Church—the round of novenas and confessions, pilgrimages and Stations of the Cross—dissipated like a cloud of incense in a sudden breeze.” The number of priests vacating their vows increased twenty-fold and those applying for priesthood dropped in a similar fashion. Convents were closed, nuns shed their habits, and those entering religious communities fell by 88 percent between 1965 and 1971.

Not everyone was a loser. The conservative churches such as the Southern Baptist, the Assembly of God, the Pentecostals, and the charismatic movement did not see the same problems. How much of that was due to the influence of Billy Graham cannot be quantified, but
it was substantial, I think. The strict fundamentalists found a new life. I can give you a local example. During this time, there was a hope for starting new Presbyterian churches in the valley. Peace Presbyterian near Bonsack was among the startups. They began with 50 members or so. A mile down the road Bonsack Baptist was founded in 1880 and a hundred years later had only 100 members. Today, Peace has 25-30 members and Bonsack Baptist has about 2300.

A similar pattern can be seen nationwide. I asked Pastor Bob Moore of Bonsack Baptist why he thought that was so and he offered several interesting thoughts. First, and probably most important, is polity—the form of governance of the churches. While the Mainline Protestant churches and even more so the Catholic churches, are governed by a strong central national office, in our case the General Assembly located in Louisville. Baptists are free polity churches; they can make up their own rules without a lot of responsibility to a national church. In that case a lot depends on the personality of the pastor and his ability to attract new members. Jerry Falwell and others of his persuasion are examples of quintessential spiritual salesmen. The pastor’s views on social issues are usually quite conservative, widely preached and draw members who think in a similar fashion. Second, such churches tend to be conservative in their electoral politics and attract members who are likely to vote the same way. We have had ample proof of that last Tuesday. Third, and probably least important, is theology; in most cases they tend to be much more fundamentalist in their thinking but that tracks along with a generalized conservatism.

Despite the growth of conservative churches many concluded that America was becoming a secular nation in which atheism and indifference would replace spiritual beliefs. Actually, that didn’t happen. What did take place was a spiritual awakening, but it was quite different from orthodox Christianity. As Hillary Rodham said in her 1969 Wellesley commencement address, “We are searching for more immediate, ecstatic, and penetrating modes of living.” The orthodoxy of the past was being replaced by social activism and what looked like a decline was more of a classic re-direction in which fervent new ideas took over from the Mainline churches. Unlike the Great Awakenings of the 19th and early 20th centuries when a neo-orthodoxy actually revived a moribund church, this time a non-orthodoxy won the day. Think about the New Age Movement, about the drug culture, about the gospel of health and wealth about which we will have much more to say. Those were the spiritual values that were inserted in place of the pious orthodoxy which came to be seen as archaic, as having lost its credibility.

The Civil Rights Movement was arguably the most pivotal event of the post war period. It was of interest to me that Douthat barely mentioned that in his analysis. Looking back on it in documentary films it is hard to believe how violent it was. If your experience was like mine, I felt somewhat removed from it. Peaceful Charlottesville and Mr. Jefferson’s Academical Village were a long way from Selma and Birmingham, from Watts and Harlem. While I believed strongly the concept of civil rights, I was not expecting to hear activism advocated so strongly and preached with such fervor from the pulpit of my church, Westminster Presbyterian. It took a while for me to realize that my passivity was an endorsement of the status quo.

Of all the events we will discuss, I think that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had the greatest impact, but it was not confined or even centered in the Church. As I mentioned last week, the
changes Martin Luther King brought about will surely mark him as one of the greatest leaders of the 20th century.

In the South, the Civil Rights Act had a more immediate and devastating effect on the Presbyterian US, the Southern branch, than it did on our Northern brethren; theirs would come later. Many of the churches in the South were the scene of confrontational integration. The pastors of those churches took several different courses. The first was somewhat like my own journey. I excuse myself from being actively involved because I was living in Germany at the beginning of the upheaval, but in my heart, I know my passiveness would have been rationalized away had I been in this country. Many, perhaps most, pastors supported civil rights and tried to bring their congregations along with them. Sometimes, particularly in larger churches in major Southern cities, they were able to do that, but the opposite was true in all too many smaller churches. Ministers were forced out of their congregations by a membership that was having none of it. Eade Anderson, who was in Greenwood, MS, can tell the story of that. Bill Klein came of age during that time in Rock Hill, SC and had firsthand experience with those issues.

What happened in Second Presbyterian in the mid-1960s was not typical of what took place in the Deep South. During that time, there was a rumor one week that Negroes, as they were still being called, were going to attend 11 o’clock worship here. The ushers got word of it and came to my father for instructions. His were just this: Greet them, hand them a bulletin, ask them where they would like to sit, and then take them to their pew. Back in those days, ushers actually did walk the members to their pew. On that morning as the chimes rang 11 times which was the signal for the service to begin, the congregation was all white; no Blacks showed up, so the church never found out what would have happened. As far as I know that was the only time the issue came to the fore.

We avoided the splitting that came to so many congregations, but we did not in the 1960s have an active program to forward the progress of Civil Rights. In addition to the backdrop of racial tension, there were other forces that were going to hasten the decline in church attendance, be it Mainline Protestant or Catholic. There were additional five flashpoints that marked a new course for Christianity and for churches.

The first of these was political polarization, and the focal point was the Vietnam War. In 1965 a group called The Clergy Concerned About Vietnam was formed under the leadership of a Lutheran pastor Richard John Neuhaus, Rabbi Abraham Herschel, and a radical Jesuit, Daniel Berrigan. The inaugural meeting was hosted by the president of Union Seminary in New York and the movement was soon endorsed by Reinhold Niebuhr. In 1967 Martin Luther King denounced the war in a sermon at Riverside Church in New York where the Concerned Clergy were holding a rally. About the same time Bishop Fulton Sheen startled the parishioners at Rochester’s Sacred Heart Cathedral when he called for immediate withdrawal of all troops from Vietnam. Only Billy Graham in the quartet of leaders from the Golden Years failed to take up the opposing view. In later years, Graham was a staunch supporter of Nixon’s Vietnam policy.

The Catholic Church was widely split in their feelings. Younger Catholics felt that anti-war protests were an extension of the civil rights movement. Older Catholics felt it was a betrayal of the relationship of church and state. Although the debate was driven by high idealism
the effect on the Church was mostly negative. “Eventually, two generations of Christian spokesmen undercut the credibility of their message by wedding it to the doctrines of the Democratic Party or the platform of the GOP,” says Ross Douthat.

This partially radicalized thinking brought on by the Vietnam War set the stage for the second flashpoint: the sexual revolution. The Bible, in both Testaments, has pretty clear teaching on sexual behavior. Support of those ideas heretofore had been driven, not just by adherence to the teachings of the church, but just as important, the fear of pregnancy. With the advent of safe and reliable birth control, all that was left to control sexual impulses was the ethical concern, which was already being questioned. Initially, everyone thought The Pill would be a concern only for the Catholics, but that was naïve. Sixty years later, the Catholic hierarchy still hasn’t figured it out but their membership has. Overwhelmingly, the Catholics feel the Pope should stay out of the bedroom and they voted with their feet. It would be interesting to know when the last Catholic woman went to confession with the following statement: “Father, I have sinned. I refilled my prescription for The Pill.” Never happened, I would guess.

The whole idea of pre-marital sex came to be questioned. In the Golden Years only 9% of Christians felt that sex before marriage was acceptable behavior. By the mid-1980s, more than 50% did not think pre-marital sex was an ethical issue. In the Golden Years the majority married the person with whom they had had their first sexual relationship. By the mid-1980s the numbers was down to less than 10% and today, I would hazard a guess that it is much lower than that.

Several subsets of the sexual revolution that affected the Church were the ordination of women, viewing homosexuality as part of a normal society and the ordination of gays and lesbians. We have seen the divisiveness of those issues here in Roanoke, but thankfully, not in our church.

The unintended consequence of free sexual expression was an explosion in unwanted pregnancies, despite the availability of The Pill. That was a surprise; everyone had thought that would put an end of the unplanned pregnancy but it did not. This, of course was greatly influenced by the passage of Roe v Wade, which triggered religious and social debate that is no closer to resolution today than it was 50 years ago. The disgrace of an unmarried woman who became pregnant disappeared and abortions skyrocketed. I have strong views on abortion as, I suspect, many of you do, but I will tell you what I think: Abortion should never be the corrective for stupidity, be it caused by laziness or impulsive behavior fueled by alcohol. If we could teach everyone to be responsible for their actions, the debate on abortions would be quite different.

We will move on to another liberalization that took place in the sexual revolution: the acceptance of divorce. In the Golden Years, about a third of marriages ended in divorce, although no one talked very much about it. During the last 50 years, the rate has increased to about 50%, but no one is too exercised or even surprised when it happens. I would suggest that divorce is better than living out a lifetime in a toxic relationship just because it was sanctified by marriage. The Bible on the other hand has Jesus speaking out strongly against divorce and linking it to adultery. He may have been right about that: Infidelity certainly leads to divorce in many cases, but that wasn’t his point. The Catholics are nothing if not creative. They have come
up with an innovative way of getting out of a marriage without calling it a divorce—annulment. If you are divorced then you cannot take communion in the Catholic church. If you find out, after marriage, something about your spouse that would have made you cancel the marriage, then you get an annulment. Is there anyone who has not had some real spousal surprise after marriage? Rather than recognize divorce, money changes hands and 90% of the Catholics who apply for annulment have it granted.

All these issues and more led to a marginalization of Christian beliefs about sexual behavior. Many in the Church looked on those teachings as outmoded and archaic and this has been certainly understandable in the Catholic Church. Mainline Protestants get around it with a series of rationalizations, so we shouldn’t be too smug about our Roman friends’ religious machinations.

The third influence that caused Churches to shrink is globalization. In the ‘70s worldwide travel became common place. With a modern 707 you could get anywhere in the world in less than a day. You could get on the plane with no more complication than buying a ticket. Now those were the good old days! Television had long since lost its novelty but it brought into our living rooms the true terror of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the wonder of the lunar landing. When pay-for-view came on the scene, things changed dramatically. There were shows that did broaden our view of the world, but it wasn’t long before you would hear every four-letter word the vocabulary, blaring from the TV set. Pornography became a First Amendment issue and soon became the main product of organized crime.

The Peace Corps began to grow and young people were experiencing firsthand what the rest of the world was like. All these factors played together to bring other religions and spiritual practices into everyday life. There were exotic alternatives to Christianity ranging from Native American rituals, to Sufi mysticism, to the Nation of Islam’s Afrocentric emphasis, and even clearly pagan practices such as Wicca. If you want to read an entertaining and informative book on this I recommend Eric Weiner’s A Man Seeks God: My Flirtations with the Divine.

Obviously not everyone was delving into new ideas. In Vanishing Boundaries, by Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens we find the following: “Our in-depth interviews suggest that the great majority of active Baby Boom Presbyterians subscribe to neither the traditional Presbyterian standards contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism, nor to any of the more contemporary theological formulations.” That meant that a large number of people one might have thought would be active in the church were adrift in a spiritual sea without much sense of denominational direction.

Fourth, the great increase in personal prosperity led some away from the Church. Having money, more of it than was expected, led to a false sense of empowerment. If you were really well fixed financially, the idea spread that you could fix anything . . . that became the solid rock on which to stand, not the Church. I would suggest to those who believe that the words of the famous American philosopher, Johnny Cash: “If you are rich that means you have to worry about everything but money.” During this time, professions were beginning to pay handsomely and the practicality of going to seminary began to be questioned; ministers had been far behind in their earning power. In the Presbyterian Church most ministers had at least seven years of
higher education and they faced the same financial challenges of their colleagues with MBAs but at half the salary. The General Assembly made efforts to redress that inequity and in doing so, priced an ordained Presbyterian minister out of reach for more than half of the denomination’s churches, leading to a huge number of congregations with no full-time pastor, consequently little chance to attract members, especially young families.

And finally, the issue that added to the shrinkage of the churches was class. This, I think is the weakest of Douthat’s arguments. He makes the case that an elite meritocracy ruled professional schools, the major newspapers, and even the high reaches of government. In these exalted precincts the Gospels, preaching of Peter and Paul seemed anachronistic. The tastemakers thought Christianity was completely déclassé. One might make the case that was true for Episcopalians and Presbyterians, but certainly it was not true for Baptists and Evangelicals who saw their ranks growing. If one thinks of that as a class difference, then that is something that needs correcting. Granted, there are differences within our religious and social culture but the Gospel which we profess to believe and the teachings of Jesus which we try to follow give no support to that kind of bias.

What was the effect of all these forces? Here are some current facts from the PCUSA that I think we all find surprising. Our denomination has lost 1.5 million members since the peak years of 20th century. That decline continues at about 60,000/year and the total membership has now dropped below 2 million. There are 10,560 congregations in our denomination. Of those, 50% have 100 members or less. Twenty-five percent have fewer than 50 members. The average congregation size is 191. The largest church is Peachtree Presbyterian in Atlanta with around 9000 members. Even that pales in comparison to the conservative megachurches which may have more than 25,000 members. Our current membership is 1153. There are 163 churches that are larger than Second Presbyterian. Only half of churches in the General Assembly are served by a fulltime ordained Presbyterian minister. Around 2500 are served by a part-time pastor, some of which are from other denominations, or lay leaders with some certification such as Gerald who serves us so well. That leaves about 20% of the churches who gave no pastor. Most of them are smaller churches. There are 30 PCUSA churches that have no members. In addition to the number of students enrolling in seminary, in some cases less than half of them do so intending to serve in a pastorate; the remainder are headed to academia or work in some Christian-related endeavor.

I mentioned a moment ago that the General Assembly is our national governing body, followed by the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic, and the Presbytery of the Peaks. The bureaucracy is complex but it controls how our church and all PCUSA churches operate. The pension plan, the remuneration of the pastor and all the benefits of the pastor are controlled by this. There is a minimum salary required for the pastor as there should be. The problem is that the total amount for a minister requires a church of a certain size to meet those financial needs. I don’t know where the break-even point is but I would suspect that it is around 400 members and you recall that the average membership across the denomination is 191. The future of those small churches which constitute half of our congregations remains uncertain. This is a complex problem of which I have only scratched the surface.
Second Presbyterian is among the fortunate few. Although we have lost a third of our members since the Golden Years, we have remained healthy. That has been due to several things. First, and most important, is the strong leadership that we have had from Bill Klein and George Anderson. They have challenged us intellectually which has been vital. As the civil rights problem was unfolding our church undertook a large building program in the late 1960s. That vision was part of what attracted Bill to accept the call here in 1968. On social issues, their preaching has been contextual, not confrontational. They have had strong support staffs which have been invaluable. Both have had sense of vision which has set the tone for the future. Second, we have had active lay leadership in the Session. Members of our church are represented on nearly every charitable board in Roanoke which speaks well for fulfilling our mission as Christians. Third, with the guidance of our leaders, we have avoided conflict that has ruined many a church. The Civil Rights movement and the other issues we have mentioned were and continue to be treacherous shoals. We have been left to deal with those problems based on what we have gleaned from our church rather than being directed from the pulpit down a particular path. That does not mean we have avoided issues, rather than we have been expected to apply Christian principles to them as individuals.

We have been blessed and with that blessing comes the challenge to be responsive to the needs of all, even though it requires rethinking long-held beliefs.

Next week we will talk about the reaction of the Church to the collapse of the Golden Age. How did they deal with the changing dynamic of the times?

Hayden Hollingsworth
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