

BC Biermann - PhD

Self and Ecclesiastical Other (work in progress)

Introduction

With the long, slow degeneration of Dewey's off-angled enterprise, the pendulum has reached its left-swung zenith, sensed gravity's pull, and began to swing back toward a more classical tradition. Let's hope the modest silver ball is able to delay the undulations of history and subsist in the Aristotelian center where the Truth typically hides its flashier cousins – the Good and the Beautiful. The Deweyan move to the left was a reaction to and a revision of the more classical pedagogical roots that still hold our star-spangled tree house in the air. In many ways an artifact of that teetering house is the postmodern American Church, which has largely abandoned a densely rich classical heritage in favor of a more narrow and emaciated Christianity that tends to mimic secular culture, rather than shape it through academic, ecclesiastical, political and ultimately artistic means. As a result, Christian leaders often wear the mantle of the uncultured book-burner and untutored partisan, which marks a conspicuous absence of the pastor-scholar who – led by a trained mind and a heart filled with love for the other – both thinks and speaks philosophically about those things we dare not speak of lest we forfeit 501c3 status.

As someone who began my religious journey in the Methodist church, confirmed in the Presbyterian variety, attended a charismatic service on Fridays with my mother, and received a graduate degree in Christianity and Culture from Knox Theological seminary, I have been around the ecclesiastical block. It has been during the latter part of my wanderings that I have begun to lament the absence of a deeper philosophical understanding of the West and its negative-value impact on my culture. It is for this reason that I seek to trace the devolution of the American Church in terms of its historically robust intellectual and ethical engagement with the socio-political mistresses of its day. What is more, such a pregnant study aims to birth a deeper understanding of an anti-intellectual current in the Christian community and its implications with regard to the lack of a broader conceptual dissent. We only need to crack the stones of history to see how such voids leave space for the rise of the political tyrant who – cloaked in religion and unrecognized by the Christian community – may enjoy its majority assent as the alleged liberator from all that ill our present condition.

The Church Defined

I) All The Way From Peter

Since this arrow is ecclesiastically bowed, please indulge me as I intend to reach back in time in order to move forward and flesh out the Church writ large and then the American varieties in particular. It was August 6, 2000, and there was a squad of elderly chaps formerly known as the *Holy office of the Inquisition* – but now tenderly referred to as the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* – who approved the declaration of “Dominus Iesus” (“Jesus the Lord”), subtitled “On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.”¹ John Hancocked by the Congregation's Prefect Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (a.k.a. Pope Benedict XVI), the declaration was endorsed by Pope John Paul II (1920-2005). Among other things, this critically tantalizing declaration reaffirmed the Catholic dogma of *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, or “Outside the Church there is No Salvation.” This exacting doctrine was originally codified in Canon I of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which decided that: “There is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved.”² As recently as 1964, the Second Vatican Council's “Lumen Gentium” affirmed that: “They could not be saved who, knowing that

the Catholic church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or to remain in it." ³ If no one "outside" the monarchical Roman Catholic church can be salvaged from the trash heap of original sin, then we must diligently examine the patterned grain of lumber that frames all those who find themselves comfortably "inside" St. Peter's indulgent marble walls.

In 1302 – the same year the beatifically bemused Dante Alighieri is exiled from his darling Florence by the Black Guelphs – Pope Boniface VIII issued the Papal Bull "Unam Sanctam," which acknowledged that the Roman Catholic church is:

...compelled in virtue of our faith to believe and maintain that there is only one holy Catholic Church, and that one is apostolic. [...] We declare, say, define, and pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff." ⁴

Here, the foundational diction that supports the Catholic church is "apostolic," which locates its origins in the church's superlative claim that it is able to trace its bishops back to Christ's original apostles – a concept generally known as *apostolic succession* (a point of contention that is not limited to Christendom, but the Muslims and Buddhists have enjoyed killing each other over it as well). ⁵ Although Protestantism has generally considered apostolic succession worthy of ale house discussion, Catholic leaders assert that the supreme Roman Pontiffs, come immediately after, occupy the position, and perform the functions of the original Rock and first bishop of Rome – Saint Peter. Simply put, the logic follows that since Peter was the leader of the apostles and the early New Testament Church, the Pope, as his successor, is the leader of the one true Church as it exists in the Blackberry Age.

The exclusionary effect of this claim to apostolic succession materializes in the pale light of the differences between the Catholic and Protestant view of the sacraments. The Catholic church, according to the Council of Trent (1545), holds that:

If anyone say that the sacraments of the New Law do not contain the grace which they signify, or that they do not confer grace on those who place no obstacle to the same, let him be anathema [set aside] (Sess. viii, can. vi). If anyone say that grace is not conferred by the sacraments *ex opere operato* but that faith in God's promises is alone sufficient for obtaining grace, let him be anathema" (Sess. can. viii; cf. can. iv, v, vii). ⁶

The Council's decree espoused the Catholic dogma that sinners are pulled into the boat by the grace that is "conferred," or granted in and through the sacraments. While Rome certainly viewed Martin Luther's teaching of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) as a "capital" error, Article IX in the *Augsburg Confession* maintained dogmatic pace with Rome and confirmed its effectual view of the sacrament of baptism, which, in virtue of its Divine institution, "causes" grace in the souls of men ("Signum sacro sanctum efficax gratiae"). ⁷ To this point, Article IX affirms that baptism is: "necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God, and that children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God's grace." ⁸

It was not until 1646 – the year headless King Charles I surrendered his somnolent and disillusioned forces in Scotland – that the Calvinistic *Westminster Confession of Faith* affected a more transparently Protestant break with Rome. With regard to the sacraments, the *Confession* asserts that they contain a spiritual relation between the sign and the thing signified. However, the grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments (rightly administered) is *not* conferred by any power *in* them. ⁹ Publicly announced in the *Confession*, and in a rather "arbitrary" semiotic fashion, mainstream Protestantism argues

that Rome has confused the invisible with the visible, or the thing signified with the sign. In other words, while God certainly may decide to confer grace at the temporally immanent moment of sacramental baptism, it is chiefly a *symbol* and an open profession of one's salvation, rather than the *means* of salvation. While Lutheranism and Protestantism differ in this matter, because they have broken key doctrinal ties to Rome, both find themselves rendered most caringly as "ecclesial communities" by a Catholic church that claims to possess the sole right to apostolic succession and the power to administer the saving sacraments that lies therein.

II) A House for God's Family: A Tale of Two Seed

My fellow travelers, I only burden you with a discussion of apostolic succession and ecclesial communities in order to acknowledge this venerable ecclesiastical split so that I might now demonstrate how such divisive wanderings are themselves anathema to the larger view of the Church. We must now think philosophically, which is to see the whole concept of the Church beyond the semantic particulars. In order to concretize the "Church" in general and the American brands in particular, it is not my intent to dispute the Roman Catholic view of apostolic succession in either fact or principle, but rather to envision the Church writ large in terms of its definition and scope. First, let us dispel the notion that the word "church" is exclusively a New Testament creation; rather, the concept of the Church as God's family is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. In Exodus, God instructed Moses to quit his incessant stuttering and demand that Pharaoh let His "people" mosey as they had always done. It is precisely this particular group of people – selected according to Yahweh's divine telos – that were consecrated, or set apart for a specific typological function through a sacred covenant.

The OT demonstrates exactly how God establishes and separates His chosen people, or "calls out" His Church. The word "church" in the NT is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), which combines the words "ek" (out) and "kaleo" (to call). *Ekklesia* was typically used to describe an assembly, or a gathering of people. This is also true of the OT Hebrew term *qahal* (קָהָל), which is translated as *ekklesia* and used over 90 times to indicate the congregation of the Children of Israel, or the family of God in the Koine Greek, or Septuagint translation of the OT. While these two terms do not possess the restricted signifier of the modern sign "church," when Jesus tells the soon to be sifted Peter in Matthew 16:18 that it is: "upon this rock I will build My church" – Christ used a common term that described a particular group of people.¹⁰

With regard to the head-opping idea of the one "true" Church, the *Westminster Confession* contends that the "invisible" universal Church consists of the whole number of the elect (the determining of the "elect" is not at issue here) that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ who is its head. What is more, the "visible" Church, which is also universal (not confined to one nation, as before under the Law), consists of the house and family of God, or all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.¹¹ In both an exclusionary and universal sense, Protestantism and Catholicism profess to represent a single "true" religion that transcends all those fussy, war-blazing little differences that divide men.¹² In terms of the latter, however, it is interesting to note that the word "Roman," a term of a particular nationality, is combined with the word "catholic," which in its original Greek form (καθολικός) is an adjective that means "general," or "universal." This dualism is generated by Rome's claim that this City of Man is the epicenter of apostolic succession and, as such, the holy concierge of a saving grace effected through the sacrament of baptism. If this is the case, the true Church must flow through the gates of Vatican City before it spreads to the nations that lie beyond its 109 acre city-state.

While the *Confession* makes a significant distinction between the invisible and visible Church, this distinction is merely one of form rather than substance. In other words,

the invisible and visible are not two distinct churches, but rather the visible is merely a subset (manifested in space and time) of the larger invisible Church that consists of the entirety of God's people animated in Genesis through Revelation. So, whether invisible or visible, if the one true Church consists of God's chosen family, this begs the question: who are these people? In Genesis 3:15, following the Fall, God informs the Deceiver that He will put: "...enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed." In both Hebrew and English, seed (בְּטוֹרֵט) is simultaneously singular and plural. Right from the very beginning, God defines his people by establishing a binary opposition between the seed, or descendent(s) of the woman and the seed, or descendent(s) of the serpent. Since both Catholic dogma and Protestant doctrine inform us that we have all descended from Eve, the distinction God makes between the two seed appears to be spiritual rather than physical.

From this division, it is unreasonably reasonable to suppose that the seed of the woman is both singular in Christ and plural in God's people, or all those that have been, are, and will be "inside" the Church. Conversely, the seed of the serpent is both singular in the Anti-Christ and plural in those that have been, are, and will be "outside" the Church. Just as these black words are given life by the white page, and just as speech is made meaningful by the changes in tone and intonation, so God's family (or the "vessels of mercy") is established and given meaning through its binary opposition to the seed of the serpent, or the "vessels of wrath" as the apostle Paul plainly declares in Romans 9.¹³ It appears, then, that the Church as God's people does not trace its source simply back to Saint Peter and the Gospels, but rather all the way back to the first book, which resonates with undressed reason since genesis (בְּרֵאשִׁית) means "birth," "beginning," "source," or "origin."

It is at this point that our critical gaze should peer beyond the foreground of a Peter-based apostolic succession and into the background of a Genesis-based spiritual lineage and the manner it is illumined by the spiritual genealogy listed in Hebrews 11. With this ethereal hall of fame in mind, permit me to highlight three points:

- 1) Since Adam was not the fruit (or seed) of Eve's loins, the line begins with Abel rather than his father.
- 2) As it is generally accepted by both Catholics and Protestants that all those individuals listed in this chapter such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, and so forth, were indeed part of God's family, it is interesting to note that while Moses is not in the biological lineage of Christ, Rahab, the whore of Jericho, is (Matthew 1:5). The fact that Moses and Rahab are both "Hall of Famers," reinforces the view that God's family, or the seed of the woman, is primarily defined through a spiritual, rather than a biological ancestry.
- 3) Since both Abel and Enoch died before the covenant of circumcision God made with Abraham (Genesis 17), we may infer that God's family is not established based solely on a sacrament's ability to confer saving grace. According to Catholic convention, the NT sacramental equivalent to OT circumcision is baptism. However, there are examples in both testaments of individuals who received sacraments under proper administration and yet did not receive grace. In the OT, Esau was circumcised by Divine command, yet it was certain even before he was born that he would not receive union with Christ (Romans 9: 11-13). More to this point, while Esau's brother Jacob was circumcised and did receive union with Christ, it appears that he did not experience the grace his circumcision signified until his conversion many years later (Genesis 32: 24-28). In the NT, Simon the sorcerer received the proper administration of baptism by Philip, yet he remained poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity (Acts 8: 13-23).

While the spiritually inherited Church is simultaneously invisible and visible in terms of its membership, it is both invisible and visible in terms of its location as a home for God's people. Simply stated, there is a visible home for the visible members and an invisible home for its invisible members – all of which are God's family. The visible home of the Church ranges from the hand-chiseled European Gothic cathedrals, to pre-fab halls in the ever-expanding suburbs of America, to the unassuming mud huts that spot the desolate African plains. While these can all be rightfully called God's visible Church house, there is an invisible Church house as well. Again looking to Genesis to amplify this concept, the first several chapters illustrate how the Church is established in terms of both membership and location. Specifically, God has placed the members, or Adam and Eve, in His house, or Eden. In the introduction to Louise Cowan's imaginative work *The Terrain of Comedy*, she notes that: "Tragedy, marked by the sudden catastrophe of the loss of a garden state, takes place most often in a palace or a great dynastic house."¹⁴ The biblical Fall is the paradigm for all classical tragedies to follow as Adam and Eve abruptly lose their garden state of lyric innocence and are cast out of God's protective house. While God provisionally restores Eden in the form of the temple-tabernacle in the OT and body-temple in the NT, these are merely material anticipations of the invisible Church home, which is the Holy City, the New Jerusalem that descends as a bride adorned for her husband in Revelation 21. Viewed in this way, the Bible is transformed into a kind of meta-epic, a grandly epic narrative that spans both space and time as the prodigal seed of the woman is guided through history and is welcomed Home by an awaiting and expectant Father. So, for the purposes of preciseness and clarity, I define the one true American Church as the visible seed of the woman (elected by God through Christ) who lives in zip codes from sea to shining sea.

So, for the purposes of preciseness and clarity, I define the American Church as the visible seed of the woman who inhabits visible church homes in zip codes from sea to shining sea. The postmodern American church is the church as previously defined that inhabits postmodernity, or the temporal term I use to describe the cultural situation, or awareness of the current postmodern age. Postmodernity, then, is a term of periodization, a rhetorical formation that constructs a present in relation to a past, or the cultural situation known as "modernity" that preceded.

III) The Postmodern American Church

Now, please indulge me just a bit more if you would as I tunnel down even deeper into an ecclesiastical core. The visible church – comprised by physical individuals bound by a spiritual lineage – has been around for over two millennia and provided us with a perpetual assembly line of permutations. However, I limit this discussion to the postmodern American church, which, painted in near egregiously broad strokes, is generally divided into three camps: Catholic, Reformed-Calvin, and Pentecostal-Charismatic-Arminian. The latter – the fastest growing and most democratic division signified by the "mega-church" movement – is the focus of my inquiry and will, from this point forward, be synonymous with the postmodern American church.

In their infancy, democratic movements are often socially electrifying and politically liberating systems that can affect positive cultural change. However, given a long enough timeline, the original exhilaration inevitably decays as the powerful pander to the demos in order to achieve and maintain their office. Both politically and ecclesiastically, things are brought down to the demos in democratic systems because the underlying virtue of any democracy is "equality." In order to resist monarchical tyrants, the concept of equality unleashed great and effective change in both the Old and New worlds. However, as we inhabit the plane of imperfect forms, true equality (without tension) is at odds with the fallen order of a hierarchy with tension. It is in light of this ontological division – that between the perfect realm of Being and the imperfect realm

of becoming – that democratic disintegration becomes particularly acute. In the U.S., democratic equality has resulted in the corruption of three central systems:

- 1) Pedagogical
- 2) Ecclesiastical
- 3) Political

Democratic equality in the pedagogical realm has resulted, simply put, in a nation of educated ignorance. In the political system, we have unleashed the appetitive beast of greed and the lust for power evidenced in bipartisan scandal and pandering. However, while listed as the second link in the chain, it is the ecclesiastical sphere that is draws my attention. While I certainly affirm the central tenets of both the European and American ecclesiastically driven political revolutions, democratic movements are not without consequences. To reiterate, given a long enough timeline all democratic tendencies break down as they are inherently flawed as constituted within immanent systems, such as the postmodern American church. However, “devolution” is a process, and in order to allow this process to manifest, I will juxtapose the church of the American founding era with that mega-church movement birthed in American postmodernity.

Ecclesiastical Devolution

I) The Founding Era Church – Product of Classical Education

In what is becoming an oft repeated refrain, it is not a stretch to assert that the majority of those who penned the *Declaration of Independence* were classically educated in a theocentric system that stressed the ancient tongues and required a mastery of Hesiod, Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante and all the other progenitors of those weighty ideas that travel between Jerusalem and Athens. As gleaned from their collective writings, the founders fully understood that free societies were sustained by a virtuous demos. If a society were to reject the classics, it would, in due course, abandon the classical virtues as well.

While American colleges were still in their adolescent stages, they only accepted entering freshmen that were literate in the ideas that shaped the West. In the mid 18th century, those accepted to Harvard were intimate with the classics and the languages they in which they were written. In the sphere of American higher academia, such requirements were ubiquitous until, generally speaking, the democratic movements of the 1960's. It was in the name of racial and gender “equality,” which are in and of themselves good things, that the classical tradition was considered elitist and largely eradicated in a reactionary pendulum swing to the left. So – my fellow travelers and only friends – we find ourselves in 2009, in a postmodernity (and possibly post-postmodernity) where no Ivy League school maintains the same requirements for classical literacy that were indicative of their institutional formative years.

Well... what does the Ivy League have to do with the ecclesiastical realm you say? As goes the eastern pedagogical system, so go the American ecclesiastical and political systems. To this point, in the infancy of our Republic the leading political activities that affected positive change were indeed classically trained, Ivy League educated clergy who were unafraid to both speak and write truth to power. In *A Son of Liberty* (1768), Harvard man and obliging Rhode Islander Silas Downer (1729-1785) dryly wrote:

Religion, learning, arts, and industry, vanished at the deformed appearance of tyranny. [...] If this country should experience such a shocking change in their affairs, or if despotic sway should succeed the fair enjoyment of liberty, I should prefer a life of freedom in Nova-Zembla, Greenland, or in the most frozen regions in the world, even where the use of fire is unknown, rather than to live here to be

tyrannized over by any of the human race. [...] It is the very spirit of the constitution that the King's subjects shall not be governed by laws, in the making of which they had no share; and this principle is the greater barrier against tyranny and oppression. ¹⁵

It is precisely this type of plucky voice that pervaded the ecclesiastical community of the American founding era. It was a time when dissent was voiced from the pulpit where learned individuals voiced sermons from their pulpits and wrote letters and pamphlets from their office chambers that were theologically and philosophically grounded in the great ideas of the West. In 1776, Samuel West delivered his election day sermon titled "On the Right to Rebel Against Governors" and argued that tyrannical government is wholly antithetical to the state of nature:

The doctrine of non-resistance and unlimited passive obedience to the worst of tyrants could never have found credit among mankind had the voice of reason been hearkened to for a guide, because such a doctrine would immediately have been discredited to be contrary to natural law. In a state of nature we have a right to make the persons that have inured us repair the damages that they have done... ¹⁶

In the *Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants* (1744), Harvard grad and Yale rector Elisha Williams (1694-1755) – whom the Yale president Ezra Stiles referred to as a "good classical scholar, well versed in logic, metaphysics, and ethics" – contemplated the end of civil government and argued that:

Should a government therefore restrain the free use of the scriptures, prohibit men the reading of them, and make it penal to examine and search them; it would be a manifest usurpation upon the common rights of mankind, as much a violation of natural liberty as the attack of a highwayman upon the road can be upon our civil rights. And indeed with respect to the sacred writings, men might not only read them if the government did prohibit the same, but they would be bound by a higher authority to read them, notwithstanding any humane prohibition. ¹⁷

Along with Sam Adams, fellow Bostonian Samuel Langdon graduated from Harvard in the class of 1740. Best known for his political sermons such as the 1775 election sermon titled "Government Corrupted by Vice and Recovered by Righteousness," in 1788 Langdon delivered a sermon titled "The Republic of the Israelites an Example to the American States" to the New Hampshire General Court. In it, he argues that:

The power in our republics is acknowledged to originate in the people: it is delegated by them to every magistrate and officer; and to the people in all authority are accountable, if they deviate from the duty, and abuse their power. Even the man, who may be advanced to the chief command of these United States, according to the proposed constitution; whose office resembles that of a king in other nations, which has always been though so sacred that they have had no conception of bringing a king before the bar of justice; even he depends on the choice of the people for his temporary and limited power, and will be liable to impeachment, trial, and disgrace for any gross misconduct. ¹⁸

Intellectually grown from the ideas sown in the Great Conversation, the American founding era is marked by the kind of pastor-scholars who served as the political conscience of the demos, reminding them of their natural rights, the right office of a king

and that king's covenant relationship with both God and, by doing so, these learned men safeguarded the people the king is bound by covenant to serve.

Living, speaking, and writing in a time of raw revolution, such individuals were classically aware that the sacrificial resistance to both the abuses of the papal monarchy, the divine right of kings, and George III in particular, was a positive democratic movement. However, they also understood that given a long enough timeline, all societies, even those founded in liberty, travel the cycle of regimes and decay into tyranny once again. In any society, especially a democracy, we need an educated demos, encouraged and led by, among others, pastor-scholars who are not afraid to speak truth to power and act as intellectual barrier reefs that contest the tide of tyranny and cultural decay through academic, ecclesiastical, political and artistic means.

II) The Postmodern Church – Product of Modern Education

In was in the 1920's that the rather democratically progressive pragmatist John Dewey scaled to new social heights as he argued that the authoritarian approach to traditional education was overly concerned with transferring knowledge and did not understand the importance of students' actual experience. A kind of Foucauldian antecedent, Dewey possessed a visible contempt for religion and traditional beliefs, which he suspiciously viewed as oppression by the wealthy and powerful. As a logical consequence, Dewey declared that schools should reject traditional religious and moral values in favor of promoting continuous experimentation via the scientific method. In a progressive nutshell, Dewey represents a fundamental departure from the classical view that a healthy republic requires a pedagogy designed to cultivate personal virtue. If the American church is to become classically educated again, it must become its own physician as it revises and reverses the failed Dewey experiment while maintaining the valuable strands of the postmodernist power structure critiques. Additionally, as the loudest voice currently on the state, the mega-church movement must play a part or it will inevitably fall from the vine.

While mainline Protestant denominations still comprise a larger percentage of the population, the Pentecostal / charismatic movement has seen a 38% increase from 1990-2001 while most traditional denominations have either remained stagnant, decreased, or increased with the trajectory of the population.¹⁹ And it is the Pentecostal-charismatic camp that is most closely aligned with the American mega-church movement, which the Hartford Institute defines as churches with a weekly attendance of over 2000 attendees.²⁰ According to this same study, out of the top 25 mega churches in attendance, 12 are non-denominational and Pentecostal-charismatic in style.²¹

I – attempting to speak the truth in a love that is sensitive to Christian unity and the mild hesitation that results – contend that these churches have become symbolic of a postmodern American church that is marked more by a cult of personality who has been Dewey-educated to possess a kind of anti-intellectual, narrow, particular view of culture, rather than a classically trained pastor-scholar who has learned a broader, more philosophical understanding of culture. Though I freely stipulate that I have no quantitative evidence to back up my claim, nevertheless, I argue that it is the latter type of clergy who possesses the ability to positively and profoundly shape culture because one must understand a thing if one is to deeply change a thing. Additionally, it is the lack of such classically trained individuals that has resulted in a Christian community that generally void of a truly philosophical dissent. The vast majority of intellectual production from the postmodern American church is marked not by a socio-political telos driven by an understanding of the history of ideas, but rather by an almost 12-step program approach aimed at self-improvement. To briefly illustrate this point, I offer a comparison between some of the more popular published sermons from the founding era with the

published, and in several cases, best-selling works by the pastors of the top 5 mega-churches ranked by attendance:

Founding

- 1) Charles Chauncy "Civil Magistrates Must Be Just, Ruling in the Fear of God" (1747)
- 2) Samuel Sherwood "Instructions to Civil Rulers" (1774)
- 3) Jacob Cushing "Divine Judgments Upon Tyrants" (1778)
- 4) Anonymous "A Dialogue Between the Devil and George III, the Tyrant of Britain" (1782)
- 5) Elhanan Winchester "A Century Sermon on the Glorious Revolution" (1788)

Postmodern

- 1) Joel Osteen *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day* (2007)
- 2) Bill Hybels *Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith* (2006)
- 3) Ed Young *Rating Your Dating While Waiting For Mating* (2005)
- 4) Rick Warren *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (2007)
- 5) Craig Groeschel *Confessions of a Pastor: Adventures in Dropping the Pose and Getting Real with God* (2006)

Of course this is a playful and quite rudimentary juxtaposition, yet I think a comparison not without a meaningful extrapolation. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule and not all mega-church pastors are of the Dewey-educated rock star variety. There has been a return to a classically oriented homeschooling afoot in recent years; however, this is the exception to the continuing rule that we are creating a citizenry – and a clergy – that is not being instructed how to think philosophically, which is to see the whole beyond the particulars and think self-reflectively and critically.

It is in light of this deficit that the fastest growing church in postmodern America is one that tends to focus on particulars, a kind of touchy-feely-Dewian experiential and progressive pragmatism designed to create a better "you" through "simple steps" of getting "real" in order to find one's "purpose" and live a happier life. But let me be as clear and the crystal cathedral on this point, there is nothing wrong with being happy and finding one's self, it is only when this nirvana pursuit is performed in a way that distracts the visible church from a broader theological, social and political awareness.

The Chilled Church: The Lure of 501c3 Status

The disengagement from the practice of a more philosophical brand of dissent that reaches beyond the standard "pro-life" and "pro-traditional family" ballot measures is not limited to the mega-church, but to the American church in general, save a few exceptions. However, the problem is particularly pronounced with the mega-church movement that has access to large quantities of both blood and treasure. As a result of the church's disengagement, the State has consistently obliged the church and relegated it to a small domestic slice of the big picture, which also contains foreign and economic policy. The States' acceptance of the church's pigeonholed dissent is evidenced whenever the Christian community attempts to step beyond the abortion and gay rights barrier and address issues that speak more directly to the power structure. In other words, this is when a pastor gets "political" and the IRS steps in to enforce "tax codes" as an excuse to make ensure that such menacing discourse is quickly squelched.

Nearly all U.S. churches have organized as "501c3 tax-exempt religious organizations." Yet, this is a fairly recent trend that was established in 1954 when churches were added to section 501c3 of the tax code. Sen. Lyndon Baines Johnson played a central role in muzzling the church's historically strong influence on shaping public policy. Although "tax exempt" status first appeared all nice and shiny, it was full of dead men's bones as its underlying function prohibits churches from addressing – in any tangible way – contemporary matters beyond abortion and gay rights. However, the real sleight of hand is revealed when one learns that churches were not taxable before 1954. In other words, to be taxable a church must first be under the taxing authority of the State. The First Amendment unmistakably places the church outside the jurisdiction of the civil government: "Congress shall make NO LAW respecting an establishment of religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Simply put, religion cannot be free if it can only be exercised if you pay the government. Due to our collective ignorance of both the founding documents and IRS tax codes, churches still gladly bite on the 501c3 lure of tax exemption.

According to what is itself an extra-constitutional authority, in Publication 557, the IRS states that:

Some organizations are not required to file Form 1023. These include: Churches, interchurch organizations of local units of a church, conventions or associations of churches, or integrated auxiliaries of a church, such as a men's or women's organization, religious school, mission society, or youth group. *These organizations are exempt automatically* if they meet the requirements of section 501(c)(3).

So, certain organizations, such as churches are "automatically" tax exempt according to IRS Code 508(c)(1)(A), which informs us that there are "mandatory exceptions" to who must apply for 501c3 status. In other words, churches, their integrated auxiliaries, and conventions or associations of churches are always already tax exempt, which is known as the "mandatory exception" rule. As such, churches are automatically tax exempt and all donations made to them are tax-deductible. So, while it is absolutely true that there has been a chilling effect of church speech as a result of this IRS carrot, churches need not even reach for the carrot as it is unnecessary for any church to seek 501c3 status.

With the predicted collapse of the modern education system and a widening move back towards a classical education, I am glad to report, in spite of the gloom I've pronounced thus far, there is great hope that the demos can awaken and at least delay the move of the tyrant. While I may bemoan the disconnectedness and superficial teachings that abound in the many of the mega-churches, these giants possess the unique ability – with a broadened scope and a deeper philosophical understanding – to become great forces for real political and social change... and... dare I say it in the age of tolerance... revolution if need be.

The Neo-Classical Church

Thus far, I have presented the need for the church to transcend its current state of amelioration by reclaiming its classical pedagogical origins while preserving the more valuable "dissenting" philosophies of postmodernism. However, I have yet to present what this new church might look like when it peers into the mirror. If the postmodern American church were to accept such a critical gaze, I hope that what might be mirrored back is a kind of Neo-Classical reflection. What I propose here is not an architectural term, but rather a term of philosophy and pedagogy; one that finds its roots in a kind of instructional ecclesiastical dialectic that has learned the lessons loudly preached by the great conversation. This new vision is a kind of synthesis between the

unifying properties of the monarchical Catholic tradition, the balancing properties of the aristocratic session system indicative of the Reformed practice and, finally, the democratic properties of the Baptist faith with the personal vibrancy of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement. What is more, a classical understanding of the history ideas that intellectually equips the church to transform a culture it now understands (rather than simply abhors) must firmly ground this synthesis.

In order for Christianity to exist as the vanguard of the arts and create the poetry that truly changes culture, it must deepen its own philosophical and theological being so that it may move beyond its status as a community that either points the bony finger of judgment at that which it does not understand or regurgitates secular culture in a splash of shiny happy people with a Christian “twist.” The American church often wonders why it has so quickly lost the culture (as did its northern European antecedent), while decades have passed and we have failed to create any real corpus of meaningful art (whether literature, film, painting, sculpture, architecture, or otherwise) that would lift the cultural vision in an ascent toward to beauty of the spheres. Indeed, where are our Dante’s, our Milton’s, heck even our Tolkien’s and Lewis’. Culture is spiritually nourished by spiritual authenticity and humanity is moved by the heavenly truths revealed to us through artistic media, but the arts have been literally been *Left Behind* in a sea of second rate novels and B-films starring Kirk Cameron... God bless him for trying.

Like a crabby old man pondering his lost loves, I have spent this chapter lamenting the ecclesiastical loss of a rich ideological heritage of dissent and culture-shaping arts. What is more, I have articulated disappointment for the neglected potential of mega-church phenomenon, and I have suggested a possible synthesis that could shape an American ecclesiastical future. However, I have yet to offer anything concrete. So, permit me to conclude with a few cursory characteristics of the Neo-Classical church:

- 1) At its core, the Neo-Classical church is simply a gathering of flawed and finite individuals who attempt to engage in the struggles of life as a community.
- 2) The Neo-Classical church is marked by a perpetual ethos of critical self-reflection and a humble willingness to admit ecclesiastical and private error. In other words, servitude over power.
- 3) The Neo-Classical church is marked by an evangelistic forfeiture of an imperialistic monologue in favor of a Socratic dialogue that offers claims of absolute truth with respect for the God-ordained experiences and cultures of others.
- 4) The Neo-Classical church is marked by an educated congregation that demonstrates a willingness to critically engage culture rather than judge it from afar.
- 5) The Neo-Classical church is marked by an acknowledgement of a theology that is understood both in terms of a systematic exegesis and an imaginative literary understanding of scripture.

While this is obviously a brief list of possible changes to the system, such changes should represent only the “middle link” in a 3-link (at minimum) chain of change. Specifically, the emergence of the Neo-Classical church presupposes deep changes in American pedagogy, or a return to a more classical education that does not neglect nor disdain the spiritually edifying and practical philosophical and technological advancements of postmodernity. Such a pedagogical change begin to produce more intellectually aware clergy that can, in turn, effect real political and social change in a democratic system predisposed to produce the tyrant. I cannot truthfully say that tyranny is unavoidable even if the measures I have outlined are undertaken, as we cannot know

the mind of God and narrative stretched before us. Alas, we can only stand on the shoulders of giants and attempt to see those things that could be better and try to make them so. Finally, if we are able to enact pedagogical change, the system will forge a more mature Christian self in opposition to a philosophically equipped ecclesiastical other, which can, with eyes wide open, affect broad political change in the polis.

ENDNOTES

¹ "Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith," (The Vatican: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000) (text online) accessed 6 August 2007, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/index.htm. The Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly known as the Sacred Congregation of the Universal Inquisition and responsible for the oversight of Catholic doctrine, is the oldest of the nine Roman Curia congregations. "Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church" (The Vatican: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000) (text online) accessed 6 August 2007, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html. "Unicity": the condition of being united; quality of the unique; unification. "Salvific": having the intention or power to bring about salvation or redemption.

² H. Leclercq, "Fourth Lateran Council" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Volume IX (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910) (text online) accessed 7 August 2007, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09018a.htm>.

³ "Lumen Gentium," (The Vatican: Lumen Gentium, 1964) (text online) accessed 7 August 2007, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

⁴ J.P. Kirsch, "Unam Sanctum" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Volume XV (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912) (text online) accessed 7 August 2007, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15126a.htm>.

⁵ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 12. The divisive claim to apostolic succession is not unique to Christianity, but is also seen in Buddhism. In *The World's Religions*, Smith discusses the split between the Buddhist sects of *Mahayana* (the "Big Raft") and *Hinayana* (the "Little Raft"), also known as *Theravada*. The split between the two Buddhist schools lies in the primacy of their claim to a purer line of apostolic succession from Guatama Buddha.

⁶ J.P. Kirsch, "The Council of Trent" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Volume XV (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912) (text online) accessed 7 August 2007, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15030c.htm>.

⁷ D.J. Kennedy, "Sacraments" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Volume XIII (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912) (text online) accessed 6 August 2007, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13295a.htm>. The *Augsburg Confession* was prepared with Luther's approval in 1530 by the German religious reformer Philip Melanchthon.

⁸ *The Augsburg Confession*, Article IX (Ft. Wayne: Project Wittenberg, 2004) (text online) accessed 7 August 2007, <http://www.ctsfw.edu/etext/boc/ac/augustana09.asc>.

⁹ G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2nd Ed. (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2004), 262.

¹⁰ Edmund P. Cowley, "The Biblical Theology of the Church" in *The Church in the Bible and the World* (Philadelphia: Baker / Paternoster, 1987) (text online) accessed 1 August 2007, <http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/articles/btchurch4.htm>.

¹¹ Williamson, *Confession of Faith*, 2nd Ed. (2004), 243.

¹² G.H. Joyce, "The Church" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Volume III (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908) (text online) accessed 6 August 2007, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03744a.htm>.

¹³ Romans 9:22-23, *New American Standard Bible* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1999), What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath (AR) prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.

¹⁴ Louise Cowan, *The Terrain of Comedy: Studies in Genre* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1985), 10.

¹⁵ Silas Downer, "A Son of Liberty." In *American Political Writing during the Founding Era*. Charles Hyneman and Donald Lutz, eds. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 98-108.

¹⁶ Samuel West, "On the Right to Rebel Against Governors." In *American Political Writing during the Founding Era*. Charles Hyneman and Donald Lutz, eds. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 410.

¹⁷ Elisha Williams, "Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants." In *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, Vol. I. Ellis Sandoz, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 61.

8 North Point Community Church Andy Stanley	Alpharetta	GA	17700	NONDENOM
9 Thomas Road Baptist Church Jonathan Falwell	Lynchburg	VA	17445	BAPT
10 Calvary Chapel Robert Coy	Ft. Lauderdale	FL	17000	CAL
12 The Potter's House T.D. Jakes	Dallas	TX	17000	NONDENOM
13 Phoenix First Assembly of God Tommy Barnett	Phoenix	AZ	16000	AG
14 Fellowship of the Woodlands Kerry Shook	Woodlands	TX	15600	NONDENOM
15 Church of the Harvest Clarence McClendon	Los Angeles	CA	15000	NONDENOM
16 West Angeles Church of God in Christ Charles Blake	Los Angeles	CA	15000	COGIC
17 World Changers Ministries Creflo Dollar	College Park	GA	15000	NONDENOM
18 New Birth Missionary Baptist Eddie Long	Lithonia	GA	15000	BAPT
19 Prestonwood Baptist Church Jack Graham	Plano	TX	14000	SBC
20 New Life Church Brady Boyd	Col Springs	CO	14000	NONDENOM
21 Northridge Church Brad Powell	Plymouth	MI	13865	NONDENOM
22 First Baptist Church, Woodstock Johnny Hunt	Woodstock	GA	13000	SBC
23 Christian Life Centre - Christian Cultural Center A.R. Bernard	Brooklyn	NY	13000	NONDENOM
24 Fellowship Church Ed Young, Jr.	Grapevine	TX	13000	SBC
25 New Light Christian Center I.V. Hillard	Houston	TX	12500	NONDENOM