

“THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF DESIRE”

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Throughout my tenure as director of the Presbyterian Church’s Office of Theology and Worship I gave a good portion of my time to ecumenical theology. I was engaged in Faith and Order consultations of the World and National Councils of Churches, dialogues with the ELCA and The Episcopal Church, and theological work within the World Communion of Reformed Churches, including fifteen years as co-chair of the Reformed-Pentecostal Dialogue. I wrote journal articles and gave speeches exploring aspects of ecclesial unity. I urged ecumenical commitment in the councils of my church.

Yet I was always aware that many of the very churches that had committed themselves to ecumenical engagement, and that were generous funders of ecumenical councils, were in the process of internal ruptures, partitions, and schisms, including my own church. The PCUSA is now experiencing its fourth schism in the past seventy-five years.

What to make of this strange disjunction between external ecumenism and internal fragmentation? Two of the four Presbyterian denominations that have split off from the PCUSA are fellow-members with the PCUSA in the World Communion of Reformed Churches, all of us ostensibly working together for Reformed unity as well as wider church unity!

One way to look at ecumenical efforts in the midst of increasing ecclesial fragmentation is from the perspective of Cardinal Kasper. Surveying decades of dialogues with the Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, and Reformed churches, Cardinal Kasper concluded that, “it can happily be stated that some of the classic disputes, which were at the root of our painful divisions, have today been basically resolved through a new consensus on fundamental points of doctrine. In other disputed questions there is at least convergence, which has helped the dialogues to move beyond previous polemical stances, and has created a more relaxed ecumenical atmosphere.”¹ This seems to be good news.

Or, we can look at Ephraim Radner’s assessment of the ecumenical movement’s efforts to bring new agreement: “But these hopes are now increasingly unmasked as being in fact a bricolage of ideas, demands, pressures, freedoms, and withdrawals, pasted together by incommensurable hopes and practices in the face of more powerful social forces. . . . Ecumenism itself has shown itself to be a seemingly spent force.”² This seems to be bad news.

These disparate assessments remind me of comedian George Carlin’s riff on license plate slogans. After commenting on mottos such as Alabama’s “Share the Wonder,” California’s “Find Yourself Here,” “You’ve Got a Friend In Pennsylvania,” and “Wander Indiana,” Carlin concluded that the truth about life must lie somewhere between New Hampshire’s “Live Free or Die” and Idaho’s “Famous Potatoes.”

Not that long ago, Protestant denominations were agreed only on their condemnation of Catholicism, while continuing to assert their theological, sacramental, and ecclesiastical differences with one another. In my own church, for example, presbyterian forms of church governance were considered faithful to Scripture (and consistent with American democracy) while episcopal forms were borrowed from Roman culture (and consistent, of course, with Old

World monarchies). Or, Reformed church sacramental practice was thought to be superior to Catholic excess and free-church neglect. Or, Reformed church commitment to the “transformation of culture” was demonstrably more consistent with the gospel than other churches’ attempts to dominate culture or to separate from it. This was all Presbyterian mythology, of course. But we were not alone, for other churches possessed their own folklore, often casting Presbyterians in the scoundrel’s role. In any case, churches experienced themselves over against other churches.

I do not mean to trivialize all differences among the churches. There were and are significant theological and ecclesial matters at stake, but thankfully, overt denominational triumphalism is now a receding memory for most churches in North America. Assertions of exclusionary superiority have now been replaced by an unprecedented openness, characterized by mutual forbearance and cordial relationships at every level of church life. Admittedly, this new openness is partially comprised of bourgeois Western tolerance, postmodern uncertainty, and confessional minimalism, but it also represents genuine ecclesial recognition of each other as authentic expressions of Christian faith and life.

There is an underside to this new-found amiability, however. Mutual civility leads the various Protestant churches to recognize not only the ecclesial integrity of other churches, but also to understand others as well as themselves as ecclesially self-sufficient. Because each is seen as an expression of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, each has everything needed to be Christ’s faithful church – which is taken to mean that each has no essential need of the others. Our unwillingness to give offense by asserting flaws in other churches is accompanied by our unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility of essential deficiency in our own churches. After all, since we believe we possess everything we need to be Christ’s faithful church we also believe that any recognition of inadequacy in ourselves can be dealt with by internal renovation. And if we easily acknowledge that the other churches also possess everything needed to be Christ’s faithful church, we need not comprehend the disgrace of our continuing division.

This explicit conviction of self-sufficiency is so fundamental to denominational self-understanding that denominations intentionally perpetuate their own institutional autonomy while voicing mild customary regret about the reality of continuing church division. Even so-called “full communion” agreements between or among churches are notable for their eagerness to preserve the individual integrity of the churches in their continued separation.³ (It is a cruel irony, however, that the welcome cessation of inter-denominational hostilities and the less-welcome perpetuation of denominational independence have not eliminated religious conflict, but merely displaced it. *Intra*-denominational hostilities intensify as major ruptures now occur within Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and Baptist denominations.)

Inter-denominational civility, ecumenical indifference, and internal disarray have created an institutional problem for denominations. When separated churches were more doctrinally coherent and organizationally distinctive, denominational loyalty was easier to maintain. Presbyterians, for instance, tended to remain Presbyterian, studying Presbyterian curriculum, supporting Presbyterian mission, buying Presbyterian adornments, and breeding Presbyterians. Denominationally differentiated theology, polity, and mission promoted denominational cohesion and continuity. But as denominational distinctives blurred in a haze of mutual forbearance, denominational loyalty was replaced by an increase in denominational switching and “church shopping.” How, then, in the face of switching and church shopping by members, ministers, and congregations are denominations and their congregations to maintain and attract members?

The term “church shopping” is telling, for America is a nation of shoppers. The advance of consumer capitalism has shaped a society driven by what Daniel Bell calls “the economy of desire.”⁴ North American society functions on the model of a sprawling shopping mall. “The Mall of America” is not just a huge complex in suburban Minneapolis, it is America itself. Large department stores and internet emporiums anchor a maze of specialty stores scattered randomly throughout the mall and across the web, catering to diverse tastes while offering ever new possibilities and encouraging impulse purchases. Churches are confined to small religious boutiques located in one wing of America’s mall, competing with one another for a dwindling market share. As people surf through society’s marketplace, they are free to choose whether or not to enter any of the religious shops and what, if anything, they will buy.

There is a limited sense in which this is an old story for the church. American religious life has long been characterized by personal freedom of choice. What is new, at least in degree, is the churches’ explicit embrace of consumer capitalism, both denominationally and congregationally. Daniel Bell notes that “Capitalism’s global extension hinges on its successful capture of the constitutive human power that is desire. In other words, capitalism is not merely an economic order but also a discipline of desire.”⁵ The disciplining of desire begins with the creation of desire. And desire is created by investing products with meaning, promising experiences that are destined to remain unfulfilled, creating space for more promise, endlessly renewed desire. In the words of Steve Jobs, “People don’t know what they want until you show it to them.” Showing it to them, and making them want it, is the business of marketing and advertising.

Positioned within the culture as voluntary associations, dependent upon choices made by individuals, the churches are unable to resist becoming consumer commodities in a marketplace society. Denominations and congregations spend time and energy developing institutional “branding” and marketing strategies, all with the help of professional consultants. Capital campaigns and media promotions highlight churches’ efforts to sell themselves as providers of religious goods and services. Meanwhile, the gospel recedes into the background as a taken-for-granted assumption, while the gospel’s mission in the world is reduced to episodic acts of compassion and service. As the churches turn away from the world and inward upon themselves, they compete with one another for market share in a declining demographic.

What the world sees in North America, and increasingly throughout the world, is an array of churches that look and act like marketplace commodities. Denominations regularly advertise themselves in national media campaigns, differentiating themselves from other churches by targeting niche markets. Congregations engage in local promotions, peddling a full range of religious goods and services. At all levels, churches put themselves forward as the best option for meeting the real and imagined needs of the shrinking number of religion’s consumers. These efforts are often called “evangelism,” but they have less to do with the good news of salvation in Christ than with the marketing of full service religious institutions. The churches turn mission away from the world and inward upon themselves, existing mainly to serve the collective needs of their new and old members while competing with one another for market share in a declining demographic.

Denominational marketing ranges from the United Methodist soft-sell – “*open doors, open hearts, open minds*” – to the United Church of Christ’s hard-line contrasting of its own inclusive welcome to the implied intolerance of other churches, “*Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we.*” Other marketing efforts include the Evangelical Lutheran Church’s direct if murky appeal to consumers – “*there is a place for you here*” – and the Presbyterian Church

(U.S.A.)’s puzzling and mercifully forgotten awareness campaign, “*The Presbyterian Church – Here and Now!*” But note: whether skillfully or clumsily, denominations try to sell themselves, their institutional selves, by promoting brand awareness and promising fulfillment of personal needs differently from and better than other churches.

Competitive marketing is even more pronounced at the level of congregations. Local churches present themselves as “*a thinking, feeling, healing community of faith,*” as “*many journeys united in Christ,*” as congregations “*going the distance,*” or, in yet another apparent homage to the Trinity, “*an intriguing, inviting, inclusive community.*” Consumer choice is highlighted by a variety of worship options (my favorite church sign trumpets a 2:00 afternoon service by proclaiming, “*At last you can sleep in on Sunday!*”). New church plants emphasize their difference from staid traditional churches by naming themselves “*Hot Metal Bridge,*” “*Revolution,*” or “*Destiny,*” and emphasizing that they are “*a new way of doing church.*” Market-tested names and “new all new” goods and services parallel standard American advertising strategies, differing from them only by their lack of subtlety and innovation.

In a stunning reversal of Paul, who said, “What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Corinthians 4:5), the churches proclaim themselves, their institutional selves, without a hint of discomfort or embarrassment. Church branding, institutional slogans, marketing strategies, and ad campaigns seem quite normal, unquestioned means of appealing to consumer preference by distinguishing one church from the rest of the pack. What is less obvious is that as churches employ the marketing methodologies of consumer capitalism, they position themselves as commodities to be selected and consumed in just the same way that we select and consume everything from laundry detergent and smart phones to movie tickets and vacation packages. And as commodities, the churches become susceptible to characteristic consumer capriciousness and fickleness: today’s *Hot Metal Bridge* may become yesterday’s *BlackBerry*.

Churchly competition, so thoroughly American, simply confirms the world’s lurking suspicion that churches care less about seeking and saving the lost than about increased market share, less about love of God and neighbors than about seeking additional adherents, all in order to enhance institutional prominence and finance future expansion.

Yet beneath the world’s conviction that churches, like other institutions in American society, are in the sales business, and beneath the world’s suspicion of churches’ motives, lies a deeper, more troubling consequence of the divided, competitive church. As purveyors of religious goods and services in a consumer-driven market economy, churches are susceptible to the short leap from the commodification of the church to the commodification of God. The progression from choosing a religion, to choosing a church, to choosing a god, leads directly to “I determine what God is.”⁶ The ecclesial economy of desire beckons us toward the god of our desiring.

The final twist in this sad tale is that the church marketing approach is doomed to failure *on its own terms*. Beyond its theological, ecclesial, and missiological failings is the stark reality that it will not work. American culture is markedly anti-institutional at every level. Americans tend to distrust institutions, expecting little from them beyond self-aggrandizement and grasping for power. The Tea Party is not an anomaly, only a crude caricature of the American view that institutions are untrustworthy, obtrusive, and restrictive. So, the churchly version of the entrepreneurial marketing ethos will fail in the long run. By offering themselves as brand-worthy, differentiated religious *institutions*, denominations and congregations adopt a strategy of attempting to sell something that a growing number of consumers do not want.

In all of this, the gospel is obscured in a smog of branding, marketing, and advertising of the churches' institutional selves. It is instructive to note that "church" has become synonymous with "institutional religion" and that the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church are seen as belonging to the same genre as the Mormon "church," the "church" of Scientology and even, according to a Louisville TV news reporter, the Buddhist "church."

As a Presbyterian, I know that every sermon must flow from a text. An after dinner speech is not a sermon, of course, but then every address and lecture is, at its heart, sermonic. So, I conclude with a text from a fine twentieth century theologian, the novelist John Updike:

The churches . . . bore for me the same relation to God that billboards did to Coca-Cola: they promoted thirst without quenching it.⁷

¹ Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits*. (London: Continuum, 2009) p. 196.

² Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2012) p. 450.

³ See Joseph D. Small, "What is Communion and When is it Full?" *Ecclesiology* 2.1 (2005).

⁴ Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2012)

⁵ Bell, *The Economy of Desire*, p. 38.

⁶ Ingolf Dalferth, "I Determine What God Is!" *Theology Today*, 57.1, April 2000.

⁷ John Updike, *A Month of Sundays* (New York: Knopf, 1975) p. 22.

