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The Return of the Congregation: Missional Warrants

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THE CONGREGATION HAS RETURNED TO THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION. The warrants¹ for this return of the congregation include: (1) a major shift in scholarly canons for research; (2) the return of major premodern theological themes to theology, including and especially trinitarian theology and eschatology within an ecumenical and missional ecclesiology; (3) the growing sense that the moral life and ethical reflection come out of the particular, the local, the face-to-face engagement with the other in contrast to the abstract, universalistic moral theories of classic modernity; and (4) a growing sense of a new era of mission in North America and internationally. In this article, I explore a few themes of this fourth warrant, the growing sense of a new era of mission and its implications for the study of theology.²

¹The use of warrants here follows Stephen Toulmin's development of Aristotle's practical syllogism in *Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

²This article is one of four proposed essays, each article developing one of the four warrants mentioned. For a more extensive discussion of the congregation in theological education, see Patrick R. Keifert and Patricia Taylor Ellison, *Testing the Spirit: Congregational Studies as Interdisciplinary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

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The new era of mission in North America warrants the return of the congregation as the primal location of the study of theology at every level of theological education, including schools of theology.

By new era of mission, I mean that Christians in North America enjoy a new opportunity to witness to Jesus Christ within an increasingly diverse population of spiritual seekers.³ Of course, this could have been said at many times in the history of the American republic. However, so many mainline Protestants have assumed that their failure to thrive indicates an inhospitable field for mission that the thesis bears repeating: Christians, including mainline Protestants,⁴ enjoy a new era of mission. Some of their congregations are flourishing within this new mission field; most are floundering. Before exploring why some flourish and others flounder, some reflection is in order on the return of the congregation to the study of theology.

I. RETURN AND NOT A RETURN

The return of the congregation is a return and not a return. In many significant ways, of course, the congregation has never left the study of theology and religion. However, the congregation during the last three hundred years of the study of theology was clearly located as the primary recipient of the products of theological education: congregational leaders. Theological education was designed as a study of theology, understood as theory to be applied in the congregations, and of certain practical skills designed to be practiced in congregations. In this sense, the congregation as the ultimate location of the fruits of theological education was never gone.

In the United States, this modern (read last three hundred years) understanding of theological education has led to an increasing divide between theory and practice. The classical disciplines of Bible, history, ethics, philosophy of religion, dogma, and theology have grown further apart from the practical disciplines—the classical disciplines becoming more interested in the audience of the academy and the practical disciplines the audience of popular culture. The practical disciplines often have been reduced to multiple courses in the arts of ministry, including preaching, leading worship, pastoral counseling, teaching, community organizing, church growth and evangelism, etc.

In the consumerist culture, schools of theology (liberationist, womanist, feminist, neo-conservative, evangelical catholic, confessionalist, etc.) become the productive centers of theological inventions that are wholesaled to the students of the theological stars who produce the theology. The students, in turn, retail these

³Some have even referred to this new era of mission as a new apostolic age. See George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); David L. Tiede, "Between Athens and Berlin: Congregations and Theological Education," review of *To Understand God: What's Theological about a Theological School*, by David Kelsey, *Christian Century*, 3-10 Feb 1993, 110-114.

⁴For purposes of this article I used "mainline Protestants" to mean a particular group of denominations, usually the American Baptist Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. For others who have worked on defining "mainstream" or "mainline," see William R. Hutchinson, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) vii-xv, 3-18; W. Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 72-105.

theologies to the members they eventually serve. Theological education becomes a commodity and individuals become the customers or consumers of such. In all of this the congregation remains, at best, the place where the product of theological education gets applied. At worst, the congregation is the occasion for the forming of consumer groups allied with different theological products. Ironically, even the congregational studies movement becomes another commodity to be used *on* congregations, since so little of this scholarship has congregations as the chief productive agents of the study or production of theology.

I believe the return of the congregation to the study of theology moves well beyond the notion of the congregation as the end point of theological education. The congregation is more than the object of study by schools of theology. It is the primal center for the study of theology and productive center of theology and theological education. Such a return of the congregation is a return from exile after some 1200 to 1600 years in the Latin church tradition and its reformation offshoots.

The church of the first four hundred to eight hundred years literally based its primal theological education within the setting of the congregation. Initial study of theology and theological education took place within the congregation and under the supervision of the bishop (the concept of bishop as one who oversees and teaches). With the establishment of Constantinian Christianity in the Greek and Latin church, and ultimately Christendom in the Latin church, the study of theology moved more and more from the local bishop, the ordinary, and the congregation to the monastic congregation. This shift within Christendom meant a change from the missional focus of the pre-Constantinian church to maintenance of Christendom. The monastic congregations in this period produced masters of schools that eventually formed the medieval university. Through this change of focus the study of theology moved from a missional focus within the local congregation to a maintenance of Christendom in the university.

The sixteenth-century reformation, both Protestant and Catholic, on the whole did not challenge this university-based system of schools of theology. Quite to the contrary, as the prince established religion, so did the prince focus more and more control upon the study of theology within the framework of government-supported universities and schools. The enlightenment only intensified this role of the university in the training of church leaders. However, the enlightenment, especially in its North American shape, created a qualitatively different set of dynamics. In the last two hundred years this has radically changed the situation for theological education. This article explores the new era of mission as one of the critical set of dynamics warranting a different role of the congregation in the study of theology.

II. A NEW ERA OF MISSION

1. *So What's New? A Dual Dynamic*

What is new is the present era's qualitatively different set of dynamics for mission. This different set of dynamics reflects both the success and failure of mod-

ernity⁵ regarding religion. Modernity succeeded in creating social systems that imagine public space as secular; that is, devoid of spiritual practices and beliefs essential to public life. Rather than seeing these spiritual practices as essential to public life, modernity imagined such spiritual practices as either harmful or irrelevant to a desirable civil community. Modernity relegated these spiritual practices to private space and time and, more often than not, isolated them into internal beliefs and values.⁶

This success has led to a major disestablishment of Christianity that had enjoyed several layers of establishment throughout most of European North American history. Initially, in the colonial period, Christianity assumed the establishment of religion within European state-church systems, even in the case of dissenter churches.⁷

With the adoption of the First Amendment, the United States broke with this state-church tradition through a legal disestablishment.⁸ However, this legal disestablishment created a second type of establishment in those well-positioned Christian churches that strongly influenced the political and social life of their communities and the nation.⁹ The concept of the “Christian America” arose and dominated the Protestant imagination through most of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century.

However, this Christian America was modified during the middle third of the twentieth century to include Roman Catholics and Jewish people. This shift is often referred to as Protestantism’s “second disestablishment.”¹⁰

In the last third of the past century, a third disestablishment took place, leaving no religious voice with an “exclusive privilege of being heard and observed.”¹¹ In effect, all religions or no religion are valued in understanding our common civil

⁵The term “modernity” is used here to refer to European-American culture between 1650-1950. For an example of how these dates are set for modernity, see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

⁶For an excellent analysis of this divide between facts and values, public and private (what he calls the modern dogma), see Wayne C. Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974).

⁷It is most significant given the role of congregations in American religion, that the last two states of the Union to maintain state-supported religion were Massachusetts (1825) and Connecticut (1827). In both cases it was the Congregational Church, the descendants of the Puritans.

⁸John K. Wilson, “Religion under the State Constitutions, 1776-1800,” *Journal of Church and State* 32 (1990) 753-773; Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 96-103; Edwin S. Gaustad, *Neither King Nor Prelate: Religion and the New Nation, 1776-1826* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

⁹See Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Martin E. Marty, *Protestantism in the United States: Righteous Empire*, 2d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1986).

¹⁰The term was first coined by Robert T. Handy, “The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935,” *Church History* 29 (1960) 3-16; reprinted in John M. Mulder and John F. Wilson, eds., *Religion in American History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978) 431-444. See also Handy, *A Christian America*, 159-184, as cited in Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *Vital Signs: The Promise of Mainstream Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 135.

¹¹Coalter et al., *Vital Signs*, 3.

life. Over the past two hundred years through this process of disestablishment, modernity created a naked public space and time.¹²

Modernity, however, failed to erase spiritual yearning in people's lives that takes shape in face-to-face community, the congregation. Indeed, such face-to-face communities of the spirit have flourished within modernity. Regularly, in the case of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, on a weekly basis, millions of modern North Americans choose to participate in religious public practices through worship, learning, and social service.¹³ They choose to have their spiritual beliefs not only profoundly shape their private lives but powerfully shape their lives in this public space as well. The naked public square, while existing in the imaginations of moderns, also is becoming a public square clothed with many spiritual practices that are dependent less upon large nationwide structures (denominations), and more upon the energies of local face-to-face communities (congregations).¹⁴

2. *Dynamic Shift from Denomination to Congregation*

This double dimension of success and failure of modernity regarding religion has profoundly shifted the energy for innovation for religious life from large nationwide structures to the level of congregations. This shift reflects both the victory of modern secularism (the notion that public space and time is without religious practices) and the flourishing of public religious practices in face-to-face communities. As long as secularism reigns, religion remains cordoned off into private space, thus leaving religious community dependent upon individual choice. Individuals on the whole seek community within which to practice their spiritual life, and these communities are irreducibly public. Persons' choices to seek community are increasingly related to local congregations rather than denominational identity. This dual dynamic seems to be intensifying at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which means that the primal initiative for mission is in the local face-to-face community, congregations.¹⁵

Congregations experience this dual dynamic in very different ways. Those congregations that remain caught in the imagination of religious establishment, or

¹²The obvious reference here is to Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). See, also, Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). I am convinced that the issue of naked "time" is as profound as naked "space," and has more to do with the sense of weariness and exhaustion in many American lives than has been fully uncovered.

¹³See R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, ed. James Wind and James Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 54-99, and Nancy Ammerman, ed., *Work, Family, and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁴The Protestant empire has had many "other" religions enter this supposedly empty space and time. See Catherine Albanese, *America, Religions and Religion*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992); R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁵Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *The Re-forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 91-116; Russell E. Richey and Robert Bruce Mullin, introduction to *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Richey and Mullin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 3-11; Russell E. Richey, "Denominations and Denominationalism: An American Morphology," in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 74-98; Russell E. Richey, "Institutional Forms of Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, 3 vols., ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988) 1:31-50, as cited in Coalter et al., *Vital Signs*, 139.

Christendom, expect the immediate environment of the congregation to provide the necessary resources for making disciples of Jesus. They expect their immediate environment to support their importance within the family and communal life of their community and to welcome the church as the spiritual fire station of the community.¹⁶ George Hunter says these congregations assume that:

- what motivated us is what will motivate them
- the approach that reached us is the approach that will reach them
- they already know what we are talking about
- they like the church enough to be able to respond affirmatively¹⁷

They have not learned the basic lessons about how to thrive after Christendom. In most circumstances,¹⁸ they experience steady decline in membership and participation in the life of the congregation. They flounder rather than flourish.

By way of contrast, those congregations who have moved to the new era of mission recognize they will flourish only by forming community around central spiritual practices that provide a bridge between the public and private dimensions of their members.¹⁹ They flourish even in the most difficult social change and demographics that cause decline in the Christendom congregation.²⁰

Within this general formula of churches that flourish, scholars have recognized specific patterns. “People join or leave congregations, not denominations.”²¹ Flourishing congregations exhibit, according to Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, the following characteristics:

- They want to grow.
- They are outwardly oriented and highly involved in outreach and service.
- They have effective leaders and a compelling message.
- What makes these congregations vital is their spiritual depth—a compelling and persuasive communication of the gospel.
- They invite people.

¹⁶I thank George Forell for this insight. As a Viennese Lutheran who immigrated to the United States in the 1950s, he saw how many mainline Protestants, who thought they no longer participated in the life of a congregation, still retained the Christendom imagination toward the church. This attitude was similar to the common attitude of citizens toward their local fire station. They are happy the fire station exists; they are willing to pay taxes to support its existence, but they are not willing to gather on a weekly basis at the fire station to celebrate its existence. However, they expect the fire station to provide fire-fighting services in the event of an emergency. Similarly, mainline Protestants may still imagine themselves members of the church and expect its services in an emergency, but it does not cross their minds to participate regularly in the ministry of the local church.

¹⁷Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 24.

¹⁸Of course, there are many circumstances where Christendom remains and where one can point to congregations still flourishing within a Christendom imagination. Examination of their demographics and social and psychographic profiles reveals how extraordinary they are in comparison to most circumstances of mainline Protestant congregations.

¹⁹Hunter refers to these congregations as apostolic. While I find his choice superior to most other options, I am not sure the term communicates all that he intends it to communicate; *Church for the Unchurched*, 26ff.

²⁰See Nancy Ammerman et al., *Congregations and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

²¹Coalter et al., *Vital Signs*, 33.

- They effectively manage a sociology of joining as well as belonging.²²
- When people choose congregations, they are seeking fulfillment in relationships that meet their “needs.”²³
- Contrary to some portrayals of needs-based outreach, studies show that “belief is the most powerful indicator of an individual baby boomer’s decision to join or leave the church. What people ‘need’ is what the church can offer: a sense of meaning in life through belonging to God.”²⁴

In important ways, the secrets to flourishing are available from the substantial body of scholarship. Unfortunately, much of this scholarship remains caught in conversations among scholars, while many effective practitioners preach partial solutions or offer their own success as a model for success. Nonetheless, we know so much more than we did twenty years ago.

In contrast to the notion that God is dead and secularism reigns, North America faces a flourishing of spiritual seekers and face-to-face communities seeking spirituality. New face-to-face communities, congregations, are more likely to develop the necessary religious ecosystems to invite, create safer space for, and engage these seekers into the practice of spiritual discernment and theological reflection. New congregations created with specific publics are more likely to flourish. New congregations, or congregations that suffer a profound transformation from Christendom to this new era of mission, are vital to the flourishing of the witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. *A Spectrum of Responses*

Weekly, I experience congregations that lie along the spectrum between those declining within a Christian imagination shaped by Christendom and those who are flourishing within a Christian imagination that understands contemporary North America to be a new era of mission. Those declining regularly blame American culture, their denominational agencies, schools of theology, baby boomers, liberals, feminists, gays/lesbians, conservatives, liturgists, church growth—the list goes on. Many also fear it is all their fault, and they live in fear of being exposed and shamed by their failure. Still others harbor deep resentments towards those who are flourishing and get caught up in any cause that will help them feel they are still alive.

²²Robert Wuthnow develops this dual sociology of flourishing congregations in *Sharing the Journey* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

²³Coalter et al., *Vital Signs*, 33-37. I modify some of their judgments of the studies cited in this fine book to focus upon relational ministry rather than functional. Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks fail to understand the difference between functional programs and relational mission. This difference is well documented in the very studies they cite, but they seem not to notice this distinction consistently. Kennon Callahan makes this distinction in relation to local churches in his concept of relational and functional keys to an effective church, especially in *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

²⁴Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 181, 205; Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, and Donald A. Luidens, “Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline,” *First Things* 31 (1993) 15. Langdon Gilkey draws a similar telling conclusion in his chapter, “The Christian Congregation as a Religious Community,” in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, ed. James Wind and James Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 100-132.

Of course, many of the congregations that still imagine themselves to be in Christendom are mainline Protestant congregations. Given the sustained decline of mainline Protestant denominations, it is tempting to say that each of these denominations has become a cultural appendix.²⁵ Like the appendix in the human body (no one knows what it was good for any longer, though likely it was once critical to human evolution), these denominations are increasingly irrelevant in shaping the imagination of our civil life. Surely, many of these denominational structures expend significant amounts of energy and time upon preserving those structures that once gave them prominence in civil and church life.²⁶ Recent studies show that they are trying to maintain these outmoded structures by demanding through the regulatory practices the participation they once enjoyed by virtue of trust and a sense of a shared vision for mission.²⁷

4. Threats or Opportunities: Fundamentalism and Secularism

Even in the case of mainline Protestantism, I share with the authors of *Vital Signs: The Promise of Mainstream Protestantism* a sense of both the profound challenge facing these denominations and the vital signs required in this new era of mission. I further agree with them that mainline Protestants must turn from imagining their great enemy to be evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, recognizing that their own acceptance of modernist secularism represents the primary challenge to their continued vitality.

Too many mainline Protestants imagine evangelical and fundamentalist Christians as their greatest enemy. This takes shape in a number of ways. They readily reject fundamentalist and evangelical truth claims regarding Scripture²⁸ but fail to propose alternative ones. Over the past twenty years I have taught a course entitled “Truth and Meaning: Uses of the Biblical Narrative.” At the beginning of the course, students are asked to write a five-page paper answering the questions, “When we say the Bible is true, what do we mean? And, what methods of interpretation appreciate those truth claims?” Consistently, most students have spent most of their space in the paper saying what they *don’t* mean by the Bible being true. Overwhelmingly they reject what they perceive to be fundamentalist and evangeli-

²⁵Coalter et al., *Vital Signs*, 21.

²⁶This is not to say that denominations and their supra-congregational structures are not vital to the future of mission in North America. It is to say that they need profound innovation, beginning with deep listening to the movement of the Spirit in the lives of congregations. Over the past few years a number of exciting research projects that take seriously such a restructuring of denominations are beginning to show promise. I and my colleagues at Church Innovations Institute, Patricia Taylor Ellison, Craig Van Gelder, Patti Ann Morlock, Jeanne Dahl, and members of the Gospel in Our Culture Network Systems Intervention Research Group are uncovering some equally promising signs of vitality in these denominational systems.

²⁷Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, “The National Organizational Structures of Protestant Denominations,” in *The Organizational Revolution*, ed. Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 308.

²⁸Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology for a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

cal answers to the question.²⁹ They seldom are able to articulate a positive answer for themselves and end up speaking of the meaningfulness of the Scriptures instead of their truth. While in the '80s students tended to focus on historical-critical methods, by the beginning of the '90s various forms of literary and cultural methods dominated, all of which were extremely vague on historical truth claims.

A ten-year project on the use of the Bible in theological education that Donald Juel and I have conducted has found a decidedly similar, though more sophisticated, pattern among teachers in mainline schools of theology. The sophistication is seldom in arguments regarding truth, but has a much more methodological sophistication. In the case of both students and faculty who are mainline Protestants, the focus is upon methods of interpretation, which aside from historical-critical methods avoid the questions of truth. The more postmodern the interpretation theory, the less interest there is in questions of truth, and the higher the focus upon de-centering methods of interpretation. On the whole, the move is to escape into meaning rather than work out the questions of truth. Interestingly, the fear of fundamentalism and evangelicalism is palpable in all the conversations, especially among those faculty who grew up in fundamentalist or evangelical churches.

Within many mainline Protestant congregations this defensive stance toward fundamentalism and evangelicalism ends with little positive use of the Bible in the exercise of day-to-day Christian practices. This lack of a positive use of Scripture threatens the existence of congregations when the anxiety within the congregational system rises. When tough issues relating to congregational life or ethics arise, the positive habits for the use of Scripture that remain in atrophied forms disappear and very dysfunctional patterns arise.³⁰

The dominance of a secularist imagination within mainline Protestant congregational leadership deepens the crisis in these floundering congregations. These leaders are unlikely to imagine God as an agent in the life of their congregation and their other communities of engagement. Instead, they accept what Hoge and Johnston call a lay liberalism. Lay liberalism does not fit any predominant theological school.

Lay liberalism is "liberal" in its stress on acceptance of differences, its tolerance of uncertainty, its strong commitment to individualism, and its generally liberal position on social and moral issues. The defining quality of lay liberalism is its wide-open tolerance of diversity in matters of belief and practice. In a sense it is more a methodology—one which assumes the validity of diversity—than an ideology. Lay liberals have come to terms with the multiple, often conflicting, cultural messages they receive in this world; they accept that variety in truth claims is inevitable.³¹

²⁹See a similar analysis by Nancy Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Post-modern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996).

³⁰Patrick R. Keifert, "The Bible, Congregational Leaders, and Moral Conversation," *Word & World* 13/4 (1993) 392-397. See also Keifert and Ellison, *Testing the Spirit*.

³¹Donald A Luidens, Dean R. Hoge, and Benton Johnson, "The Emergence of Lay Liberalism among Baby Boomers," *Theology Today* 51 (1994) 253; cited also in Coalter et al., *Vital Signs*, 129.

Other evidence suggests this lay liberalism is also strong in the parents and children of the baby boomers, but it shows itself in different behavior. These parents remain members in a congregation where they are committed to sustaining Christendom as their “choice” among the many religious truths. Baby boomers accepted this lay liberalism but were provided no good reasons for retaining such commitments of choice. The children of the boomers, since their parents did not choose to stay active as adults, were seldom given the option of making a choice but accept the basic contours of this lay liberalism. The result is three generations of lay liberalism, with very different results for mainline Protestant congregations.

The emerging generations imagine that diverse choices are always available for the individual and remain quite unaware of the religious and theological practices already structuring their imaginations and behavior. They seldom imagine that the notion of a free agency regarding religious experience is a profound given that clearly involves profound assumptions. In short, their imaginations are secular and liberal, and they have never attended to the shaping of Christian practices that otherwise might significantly challenge those religious assumptions.

More significantly for the congregation, if all religions are equally true, what possible motivation is there for inviting someone to engage in Christian practices? Lay liberalism renders the basis of the truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ moot and erodes the confidence and motivation to proclaim it. Needless to say, then, such congregations flounder in an era where church attendance is no longer considered critical to civil life. With the social pressures of the immediate environment gone, these congregations wither and often die. I agree with Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks that secularism in the form of lay liberalism obviates a “central characteristic of the church: belief matters.”³²

I would further argue that the role of diverse religious and spiritual practices in the public space challenges Christians to find ways of encouraging Christian spiritual practices for public life. They need to do this without either accepting secularist assumptions or rejecting the significant and, no doubt, unique contributions of other spiritual practices.

In short, God is not dead, nor is public religious practice. Christians have a wonderful opportunity to offer Christian faith and practices in North America as part of the common good of our globe.

III. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY

Allow me to make a few obvious and broad-stroke theses for the study of theology that follow from these missional warrants for the return of the congregation to the study of theology:

- The lived experience of the faithful in flourishing, missional³³ congregations is primal to the study of theology.

³²Coalter et al., *Vital Signs*, 129.

- The study of the relational web of leadership systems within these flourishing, missional congregations replaces the modern Christendom focus upon the parish pastor as family chaplain or the spiritual firefighter who provides the hatch, match, and dispatch functions of Christendom.
- Pride of place needs to be given to new mission development and redevelopment, since these flourishing congregations disproportionately are new mission developments or redevelopments.
- The study of the emerging spiritual ecosystems that nurture embodied practices of faith is central to the study of theology.
- These ecosystems of nurture need to function with the sociological dynamics of both joining and belonging that characterize flourishing congregations.
- Redirect critical reflection away from a defensive posture against fundamentalism to a proactive engagement of the truth claims regarding Jesus Christ and the apostolic witness to him that are embodied in Scripture and the Christian tradition.
- Direct a congregationally based ecumenical engagement among Orthodox, Catholics, and evangelical and mainline Protestants in light of the emerging new era of mission.
- Within these contexts of face-to-face spiritual communities, the study of theology remains, as it always has been, the diverse Christian practices of understanding God truly.
- The encounter of the living God at work in Jesus Christ, as witnessed to in the Bible, makes up the primal experience of these emerging spiritual ecosystems. This requires a major revamping of the use of the Bible in the study of theology.
- The mission of God drives these diverse Christian practices, *not* the maintenance of Christendom.
- The core of all of these implications is the transformation of the Christian imagination for a new era of mission. ⊕

³³Missional here refers specifically to a growing body of literature, especially the Gospel in Our Culture Network, that works at clarifying within a theological framework the nature of the church in this new era of mission. See George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Daryl Guder, ed., *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Craig Van Gelder, *Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).