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“SERVICE AND STILLNESS: THE CHURCH AS ANTI-ENTERTAINMENT”

BY CRAIG WRIGHT

Good morning. Before I begin, let me take a moment to thank, one more time, Cindi Beth Johnson, Mary McNamara, and the entire UTS community for including me in this year’s convocation activities. As I said yesterday, the education I received at UTS and the time I spent here were both deeply valuable to me, and to be re-membered, so to speak, in this way, back into the family, as it were, is a great gift. So: thank you.

In case anyone here didn’t attend my talk yesterday: I’m a radically monotheistic white, male, heterosexual, privileged Judeo-Christian who thinks language is for creating new truth more than expressing old ones and I have a lot of blind spots.

And I’m from Hollywood and I’m on drugs.

Yesterday, if I can endanger myself by collapsing everything I said into a very short statement, thus begging the question, “Why couldn’t you have said it that simply yesterday?” I said that the mainline Protestant church -- not all churches, but the mainline Protestant church with all its gifts and challenges -- is in a situation today where it’s at least possible to suggest that a great deal of what it has historically transmitted, as a carrier of meanings, has been taken up, as a result of God-charged forces, by a host of other organs, so to speak, most notably, popular culture; and at the end of my talk, I suggested that perhaps it was time for the mainline Protestant church to consider rising to the task of enacting, instead of its own growth and enrichment according to popular models of those additive dynamics, its own diminishment into something more modest and focused but more in tune with its centralizing myth. I also reported my visceral experience of finding the mainline Protestant church’s efforts to market itself with the zippy-gooney vehemence of a product among products, an experience among experiences, to be somehow eerie and unsettling: to be, for me, a problematic experience of paradox.

Today I’d like to offer a few constructive thoughts about what the church might do in response to those concerns, how it might shrink in size but grow in faith, and raise questions about whether those more focused missions left to mainline Protestantism *can* be coherently marketed as an experience among experiences without doing damage to the experience itself and driving the church into a deeper state of unequivocal impotence.

As all graduates of UTS know, the Protestant mind, for a variety of reasons best explicated by H. Richard Niebuhr in his book “The Kingdom of God In America,” does a better job at critiquing existing structures than it does at constructing new ones, and, undoubtedly, my remarks today will bear this home truth out. All I can do is say: “I’m one person: these are my thoughts: were the materials and tools mine to work with, this is what I would try. Obviously, other methods, including those in direct contrast to my own, would and will be part of God’s good future. These ponderings and proposals are mine.”

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I would like to talk first about entertainment.

For a long time, to loosely paraphrase Proust, I used to be on AOL.

I started using AOL in the early 1990's when it was almost the only choice for the average home computer user, and I stuck with it for many years because of the ease with which I connected to it when I was traveling. But I never felt truly comfortable with it.

What I found most unsettling about AOL was the way it marketed movies and TV shows with such enthusiastic vehemence, as though they were things I was essentially required to see. For instance, when a headline on the AOL Welcome Screen reads "Harry Potter's Coming Are You Ready" (and it will be doing so sometime soon), followed by a clickable link reading "Be Prepared," the user senses somehow that seeing the new Harry Potter movie is not really a matter of choice. This is not framed as a situation where a consumer with choices is about to be seduced by a marketing come-on. This is more like a declaration of war. In the world according to AOL, Hollywood is sending the movie, like a torpedo, straight at you. You will be hit. The question is: Will you be prepared?

And guess what? Chances are, in the world according to AOL, the best way to prepare for the new Harry Potter movie is to watch all the previous Harry Potter movies and, if you're really committed, buy and skim all the previous Harry Potter books: maybe even some auxiliary material, like "A Guide To Hogwart's Hell" or whatever they call it. That's how you "prepare" yourself for the consumption of incoming media – by consuming an exponentially larger amount of media beforehand.

(Anyone who has ever drunk five chocolate milkshakes before dinner in order to "prepare" for the steak and baked potato knows what this dynamic's all about. But of course no one does that: and no one thinks about consumption of mass media the same way they think about the consumption of food. But they should.)

Anyway. In exchange for this immense financial participation and this radical commitment of time in a short life, what does AOL offer the well-prepared ticket buyer in return, once she's seen all the movies, read all the books, and somehow gotten to work every day? They don't give her a discount. And they certainly give her no thanks. What they give the well-prepared ticket buyer is the illusory opportunity to switch sides in the war and "participate" in the attack by "rating" the new Harry Potter movie in relation to its predecessors, or by "chatting" about the movie in a digital chat room with like-minded individuals. Never mind that your "participation" as a "rater" is just you supplying AOL with free audience response information that it sells to movie studios while you sit glued to your computer. Never mind that while you're "chatting" about the new Harry Potter movie, the real work of making sure you see hundreds of banner ads for other movies is going on at the top of the screen and the back of your brain while you sit, right where they want you, glued to your computer. Never mind that AOL, in a worst-case scenario, has just convinced you to spend over 100 hours and 500 dollars ingesting media and advertisements for media under the guise of "active participation." Never mind all that. AOL promised to prepare you for the new Harry Potter movie, and by the time you got done watching, reading, and surfing through all that media, you were exhausted, victimized, forcibly choked with advertisements until your mind, in order to protect itself, stopped noticing what was happening, but damn it, you were prepared – and for a while, when it was over, they helped you pretend you weren't just a consumer.

This system works, as they say, like a charm.

But tell me, followers of Jesus Christ: tell me, church leaders: how much of your very limited God-given time do you really think you're supposed to spend on watching TV and movies and surfing the Web and playing video games? How much time do you think you're supposed to spend on Earth being entertained?

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Perhaps it will be useful if I define my term: "entertainment."

In his book "Basic Concepts," Heidegger wrote: "Even though being (as what is emptiest and most worn-out) might sink from the sphere of "reflection" that otherwise remains, and completely disappear into the indifference of forgetting in which even this indifference is annihilated, everywhere being once again constrains us. And indeed it constrains us continually, so that beings meet us and carry us away, surpass us and flatten us, burden us and uplift us. For if, prior to all beings, being and only being allows each to be a being, then each being remains, however it might concern and affect us, infinitely far behind the constraint of being itself. No multitude of beings ever surpasses the "force" that comes from being and presences as being. Even where all beings no longer concern us, become indifferent, and give themselves over to empty space, even there the force of being reigns. Being," Heidegger wrote, "is the emptiest and the most common of all. Being is the most intelligible and the most worn-out. Being is the most reliable and the most said. Being is the most forgotten and the most constraining."

By "entertainment," I mean: that which momentarily relieves the "constraint of Being." Anyone who has plopped down on their sofa at the end of the day, turned on "Sex And The City" or "Star Trek: The Next Generation" or "Lost" or "The L Word" and breathed through their mouth for 75 minutes knows what I'm talking about.

"Entertainment" is that which relieves the sensation of the constraint of being.

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One morning at about 5 a.m., I was sitting at the counter in a diner near my home in Los Angeles. Unable to sleep, I'd finally given up and gone to breakfast. As I sat alone at the counter, the waitress, who was just about to get off work, sat down next to me and counted her tips. After she was done, she stuck around and started a conversation.

A few minutes into the conversation, I asked her what book she was reading, if she was indeed reading one. She told me wearily that she was reading "The Devil In The White City" but that it wasn't very good. I nodded my tacit understanding – so few books are actually any good. It's true. She sipped her coffee and then, unbidden, she went on.

"I don't really have that much time to read lately anyway, I have enough trouble just keeping up with my shows." I asked what her shows were. "Oh, you know," she said, "Lost, Desperate Housewives, Brothers and Sisters, CSI, CSI Miami, CSI New York, Law and Order SVU, NCIS, NCIS Los Angeles. And some others. Breaking Bad."

I was astonished. "How do you keep up with all those shows?"

"Oh, God," she said, "sometimes I don't." She said it as if her failure to keep up wasn't *exactly* a crime, per se, but was probably a great disappointment for the networks, a disappointment for which she had to, let's be honest, take some responsibility.

This woefully fatigued waitress lamenting, after a long night on her feet, her lack of ability to keep up with what she called “her shows,” after it raised a cloud of pity for how much relief from the constraints of being she needed, raised a question in my mind.

How many shows should a healthy, contributing member of society “have”? How many hours a day should a healthy, contributing member of society be entertained?

Certainly we’d all agree there’s a range of valid answers to the question, but hell, let’s just shoot the breeze here, we’re all friends: what’s the upper daily limit when it comes to filmed “entertainment,” to say nothing of reading fiction for pleasure, which, given the proliferation of bookstores in this supposedly post-literate society, still happens.

One hour a day? Two? Three?

According to the A.C. Nielsen Co., the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day (or 28 hours/week, or 2 months of nonstop TV-watching per year).

By this accounting, in a 65-year life, that person will have spent 9 years glued to the tube. Add to those four daily TV hours a modest 1.5 more for the Internet or video games: a bonus four hours a week for rented movies or movies seen in the cinema: and that 9 years turns rather quickly to 12. And remember, these numbers are just averages.

Many people watch a lot more TV than that. Many people are even more continually entertained.

One has to assume the general operative assumptions behind these statistics are something like: we find ourselves alive, faced with Being: Being is constraining: in order to temporarily relieve the consciousness of the sensation of the constraint of Being, it is soothing, or, to be more precise, it is palliative to offer the consciousness sensory input that interests, or, to be more precise, titillates it without endangering it, i.e., it’s good to “entertain” it: and the only upper limit on the time one spends being entertained is the for-now apparently natural limit imposed by the needs to earn money or sleep.

The message of popular culture is: be entertained. If problems arise that cut into entertainment, solve them: if working in the office is a drag, work from home: if Haiti is rocked by an earthquake, text Haiti to help: if the country’s in a hopeless war, vote the administration out of office: make meaningful choices now with the meaningless goal of once again being entertained: because the purpose of life is to be entertained.

Or: better still: to be an entertainer.

And I tell this story because of how easy I know it can be, as a minister, to become, by degrees, an entertainer, and how easy it is to turn the liturgy, by degrees, into entertainment. And I tell this story because I know, from my travels around the country, how many people are afflicted with the cosmic malady I’m about to describe.

I was on a plane a few years ago, traveling from somewhere to Los Angeles, and the gentleman sitting next to me was very friendly. His name was Kevin, and he was an African-American math teacher from Detroit on his way to see his girlfriend Erica in Orange County. As we got to know each other, he spoke with great conviction about the challenges of teaching in a city as economically depressed as Detroit, and even more convincingly about the daunting general challenge

of how to inspire African-American males to achieve academic excellence. He bemoaned the fact that most of his African-American male students had only sports figures, rappers and actors for role models. This was before Barack Obama was elected president, but I assume the challenge of modeling success for African-American males remains. Kevin articulated to me his admirable master plan to integrate African-American business leaders into the lives of public schools by having them office in school buildings, in order to continually place before the eyes of his students more diverse models for African-American success. And he went on from there with more ideas, more visions. His dedication to teaching and his students was inspiring. Listening to Kevin talk, I felt a twinge of hope for the future.

But the future, Kevin reminded me, was still a long way off. As things stood, the goal of most of his male African-American students was not to “do” anything at all in life, but merely to “be” rich – to “do” nothing but be continually entertained. In response to this, I mentioned basketball star LeBron James’ comment that his goal was to make sure no one in his family had to work for ten generations. Kevin groaned, hearing that. It actually seemed to hurt Kevin physically to think of such an idea being broadcast to his students by someone in whose word they would put so much stock.

At that moment, our steward came by with beverages and pretzels and there was a brief recess from the conversation.

After the steward went his merry way, the conversational table turned and Kevin asked me what I did for a living. I told him I was a playwright, but that I had also written for SIX FEET UNDER and LOST. He asked me all the normal questions people ask me – how do people write TV shows, did you get to go to Hawaii for LOST, stuff like that – and then he asked me some less common questions, like, “Do actors resent the fact that rappers and singers are taking so many roles in movies?” I answered as best I could and then the conversation ended. That was fine. It had been a long day. We were both tired. So we downed our drinks, tilted our seats back, and fell silent.

For about a minute.

And then Kevin asked me a question. More precisely, he asked me if he could ask me a question. I said, “Sure,” pulling my seat back up, “What’s the question?”

He said, “How does a person go about getting an audition?” “For what?” I asked. “You know, to be in a movie or a TV show.”

“Well,” I said, “most people have an agent, and the agent gets them the audition.” “Oh,” he said. “Okay.” A moment passed. “And how do you get an agent?” I explained to him the process of getting an agent. He listened with interest of a much different kind than he’d exhibited before. The idealistic math teacher’s basso profundo had given way to a reedy baritone, and even his physical manner had become more animated. It was as though his center of gravity had dropped out onto the floor and rolled down the aisle.

And it had.

“Why do you want to know all this?” I asked him. He smiled sheepishly and said “Oh, you know, I’ve just always thought of myself as kinda, you know, charismatic, and I figured if I could get an audition while I was out here, I should give it a shot, you know.”

I said, “Wait a minute, you just sat here and told me that you teach math to kids in Detroit, and that teaching those kids is the most important thing in the world you can do.”

“Mmhmm.”

“And yet you are still haunted by the desire to be an actor in movies or on TV.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Why?”

He hummed “I don’t know” without speaking and said, “Just seems like fun.”

By which he meant: if I were an entertainer, someone whose ability to perform (itself a masturbatory entertainment) could relieve the sensation of the constraint of Being of others (for everyone agrees that to have this crushing constraint relieved is the highest good) and if I could relieve it to such an impressive degree that I could somehow be paid, thanks to the magical algorithms of a global electronic image distribution system, an infinitesimally small fee by millions of people such that I myself could become “rich,” then I would have the money and time to “enjoy myself,” i.e., then I could be even more continually, in this short, difficult life, entertained.

For many people, for most people, being entertained is the highest value. The odd monstrous prominence of entertainers in our culture testifies unequivocally to this fact.

Who matters more than those who keep us entertained?

And against these continually crashing tidal waves of entertainment and arguments for entertainment as the zenith of human experience stands: the church...?

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Anyone who has seen the UCC’s “Still Speaking” video on YouTube or Facebook has to agree: it’s a well-done video. It is really a professional-quality promotional piece.

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How I wish I could go back in time, to, say, the period “dramatized” in the Acts of the Apostles, and see the moment when the human ability to tell the Gospel story in a vivid, compelling fashion first overtook the content of the Gospel and became a quietly cherished end in itself. I am neither the most experienced churchgoer nor the most well-read student of theology or church history, by far, but, aside from being told that they don’t have music in the Church of Christ, and studying the controversies associated with icons, I sincerely cannot recall ever really plumbing this question before: this question of how the human capacity to entertain, to relieve the sensation of the constraint of Being, assists, is included in, or out-and-out colonizes the process of disseminating the Gospel.

Undoubtedly, from the moment the Romans made Christianity the official religion of the empire, there must have been a whopping increase in production values, so to speak, when it came to delivering the Gospel message to the people; I’ve seen those trompe l’oeil ceilings in those cathedrals in Rome: I’ve heard those Palestrina masses: but I would really like to have been present around that campfire in the 1st century when one guy finished up a recitation of the crucifixion and someone realized: “I liked it better when the other guy did it. I just felt it more. I don’t know. I cried. I didn’t cry this time.”

Of course, I'm making a joke. But it is a Gospel joke. It is a fictionalized story of a moment that must have happened, for, lo and behold, ever since then, every effort has been made by billions of people, to adorn the Gospel story, especially the mass, with every bauble, bangle, and bead intended to evoke a host of proper human responses: pity: compassion: conviction of sin: awe: holy terror: delight. God knows, the airwaves are thick even today, perhaps especially today, with the light-years-deep sonic residue left behind by centuries of sonic adornment of the Gospel story: the walls of our museums are covered with religious artworks: bookstores overflow with retellings of and reflections upon the Gospels: music stores are filled with the works of Christian artists, running the gamut from traditional hymns to pop songs so oblique in their commitments to the faith one could listen to and love them without almost ever knowing they're devotional; and in this age of shrinking membership in the mainline Protestant church, who can doubt that those few churches that are thriving and growing are churches with "good" music programs, and "compelling" preachers able to deliver the Gospel and its attendant demands in a way that is, and there's no other word quite as good for it, entertaining?

A recent study linked the ingestion of diet soda to obesity. At first glance, this seems like a paradox. How can drinking diet soda make you obese? Well, because people who drink diet soda are people who like the flavor "sweetness:" and it turns out that, even given the low-to-zero caloric content of diet soda, the continual intake of sweetness, even when it's fake, keeps the Pavlovian mania for sweetness alive in the body; strengthens it, in fact, in some people to such a degree that one can say: their addiction to diet soda makes them gain weight, or at the very least, makes it harder to lose it, since their tongues and brains are trained by diet soda to want ever higher concentrations of sweetness.

Is it possible that the delivery of the Gospel with the most advanced methods of entertainment available, in an age addicted to entertainment as a relief from the sensation of the constraint of Being, renders the Gospel, to some small degree, powerless?

Yes.

"Now, wait a minute, Craig," I imagine some of you are thinking (and I used this rhetorical device yesterday, too!), "are you saying that there shouldn't be music and art and compelling preaching in church?" "No." "Why shouldn't the highest capacities for catching and holding human attention be used in the service of delivering the most divine message of all?" "Well, they can be, but it's more complicated than that." "No it isn't."

"Yes it is!"

I know I only won that argument because it's fictional. But I won.

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From the moment Jesus died, what I would call an essential wound in the church has existed, and from that wound has flowed a lot of cultural material and somewhat less spiritual reality. The wound, so to speak, is the distance or difference between the two works the church has historically felt itself to be tasked with, namely, 1) continuing the work of Jesus and 2) maintaining a structure from which that now-communal work might spring. The reason I christen this disjuncture a wound is the first task is well-supported by the Gospel and second is supported, but far less sturdily, and the imbalance between the two has created a perpetual tear in the conceptual fabric of Christianity.

Simply put: the church is well-designed for service but not for survival.

If I come upon some Americans in Mexico digging a well and I ask them, “What are you doing here?” And they answer me: “We are followers of Jesus Christ. He lived a long time ago. He was God and a human being at the same time: and because he chose his own death in our place, we believe the life we have has greater depth, and it may indeed go on beyond death in ways we can’t imagine: and all this is a free gift. He said, ‘Whatever you do to anybody else, you do to me,’ so, since we’re so grateful for His life and His sacrifice, we figure we’d better help other people, we want to, since they’re Him, so we came down here from Vadnais Heights to dig these people a well,” I get it.

If I come upon some people in a public relations firm in Cleveland, and I see them looking at a mock-up of a video to be distributed on YouTube and Facebook, and I ask them, “What are you doing here?” And they answer me: “We are a task force from the United Church of Christ and we’re putting together a fresh new set of marketing materials designed to let people know what we’re all about,” I get suspicious.

“But wait,” they might say, “you don’t understand, Craig. If our denomination keeps on shrinking at its current rate, it might not exist in a hundred years.”

To which I reply: “Show me where in the Gospel it says that would be a problem. How much money are you people spending on this in terms of man-hours and ad-time?”

To which they might reply, “Craig, our denomination is a unique voice for a host of under-represented populations and points of view. If our denomination...”

This is when I start to listen, let’s be honest, a little less well. My bad.

When a denomination looks more devoted to its own survival than it is to service, I listen less well, because what’s really at risk is no longer so readily apparent to me, and the Gospel, aside from some small late additions to the original texts, isn’t much help.

The Gospel is pretty much standing off to one side with its hands in the air, saying, “This is their thing, dude. Talk to them.”

Anyone who has seen the UCC’s “Still Speaking” video on YouTube or Facebook has to agree: it’s a well-done video. It is really a professional-quality promotional piece.

But let’s assume it works: that its entertaining montage methods draw new members into the UCC. Having been drawn in by passively-consumed hip entertainment, do we honestly think they’re going to come every Sunday and listen to a drunk hammer out hymns on an old German piano? Neither that drunk nor those hymns mean anything to this newcomer: there’s no nostalgia upon which to fall back: you’ll have to keep this hip newcomer entertained with fresh new songs delivered by young people through a sound system equal to what they have at home. No one wants to party with losers.

So let’s assume you do it. You create a hip worship ensemble that leads the singing and quite often performs, performance being more and more a modality one finds in worship: you now have a music group everyone agrees is the best worship ensemble in the area, “as good as anything you hear on the radio,” do you honestly think people are going to stay awake for your sermon? What’s it about? Hosea? That dude on Sirius Radio...? No. You’d better pack that thing with jokes and keep it short.

And let's assume you do that, too: and it all works: your music is entertaining: your sermons, too: and every Sunday the pews are full of people ready to be entertained.

What does it have to do with Jesus Christ?

Does it have any more to do with Jesus Christ than any other well-performed communal experience? Sure, it's all "about" Jesus Christ, but what it is is entertainment, designed and delivered to be enjoyed passively as a product: as a way to spend time.

In this example, all this energy is being expended within the UCC to make church a better entertainment. Where in the Bible is this project justified, let alone commanded?

What about the poor? What about the homeless? What about the sick? You say, "We're taking care of them, too!"

"Too?"

"Yeah, we're taking care of them, too!"

"There is no "too" in "Gospel!" This desperate project we're all so hard at work on, of how to keep people coming to UCC churches, has next to nothing to do with Jesus Christ compared to the harder Bible-justified work that remains to be done outside!

Church should not relieve the sensation of the constraint of Being! It should exacerbate it! When that church bell rings at the end of the service, we should burst out of that building not because we've just been subjected to bad versions of ten different things we can get better versions of from popular culture (delivered with far less winking guile, to be sure!) We should burst out of church in a hurry to get things done for others!

And not because we were conned by the tools of entertainment into feeling.

Church should not relieve the sensation of the constraint of Being. It should exacerbate it. Church should not relieve the constraint of Being. It should exacerbate it.

Let the megachurches entertain their swelling flocks. It makes perfect sense that they should. The Gospel they preach is personal satisfaction, aided and abetted by faith. Entertainment makes perfect sense in that model. Sit back and enjoy yourself. God bless.

But that model doesn't make sense for the radically monotheistic, logically coherent, socially relevant mainline Protestant church.

Never before has vigilance been more necessary than it is during this time when the methods of mediation are so various and enticing that to be alive is to be entertained: but to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ is to die to the self, to push into the constraint of Being, to serve others, and, finally, to do what no one wants to do: sit still.

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Time and time again in the Gospels, the apostles go looking for Jesus and they find him with planners, trying to figure out how to get more people on board.

No. Time and time again, they go looking for him, and when he's not healing the sick or feeding the poor, he's alone and sitting still, communing, I assume, with God.

How little time the mainline Protestant church devotes to being still.

Whenever anyone asks me why I left my post at Cleveland Avenue UMC, I tell them: it was because a close study of Methodist communion theology led me to the conclusion that the notion that an ordained minister was necessary to perform the mass was authorized neither by the Bible nor by logic, and that I had come to believe that the only logically coherent Protestant polity was that of the Quakers.

Once the priesthood of all believers is established as a model, what place does ordained ministry *as we currently understand it* have in a coherent Christianity?

(Once the priesthood of all believers is established as a model, what place does the church *as we currently understand it* really have in a coherent secular society?)

There *are* answers to these questions, but they're another day. The point is: I think the Quakers got it right and, lo and behold, they do a lot of sitting still and being quiet, and in doing so, they shine more brightly as a beacon of divine Otherness than any fast-paced video, any tear-jerking sermon, any hummable pop tune, than any entertainment.

Best of all, their behavior, their sitting still, is authorized by the example of Jesus Christ. Just as service to others is authorized by that example. Just as the notion of self-diminishment in the name of service is authorized: by the example of Jesus Christ.

I know it's not this simple. I know there are numerous ways in which the fight for the survival of a denomination can feel like a fight for a firm place to stand from which to give even more, but I have to ask: where does this survivalist reasoning appear in the Bible? Where does it come from? It doesn't come from Bethlehem. It certainly doesn't come from Golgotha. It comes from Rome. And Washington. By way of Hollywood. The use of the tools of entertainment to attract potential believers is a human project. It will generate human outcomes and leave all the humans involved wanting more.

It seems to me a stronger faith in the simple fact of God's sovereignty would set the mainline church free to serve and be still: Jesus did it and people followed Him. They followed him in such numbers and with such passion that the directionality of the whole Western World was altered for two millennia. Is that dynamic no longer valid?

What changed? Nothing but that the struggling mainline Protestant denominations have succumbed, in a variety of ways, to the fears of every endangered human institution, and the more they've scrambled, like every human institution, to maintain themselves, the more they have come to look like every human institution, and the less they have drawn unto themselves the kinds of commitments worthy of the name Jesus Christ.

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In closing, let me tell you exactly what's happening right now and what's going to happen in the next 100 years in America. The liberal and moderate denominations of the mainline Protestant church – that is, the Episcopalians, the Presbyterians, the UCC, the United Methodists, the ELCA, the Church of the Brethren, and the Reformed Church of America – are shrinking at an average rate of

20% per 50 years, so you're set to see a net loss of 40% membership in the next hundred years. (I'm sure many of you here are far more deeply knit into the sources where these statistics come from, and you may have different numbers at your disposal: let's assume I'm way off but that I'm not wrong.)

All those denominations, in an effort to stay afloat, are pouring money and time into marketing: who knows what the percentages are, in terms of gross revenues, but I don't really care: there isn't a dollar being spent on marketing these denominations that wouldn't be better spent on concrete service to others. And the seeping in of the ethos of entertainment that this seemingly necessary marketing push requires does so much to discredit the message of the church, the sooner we stop thinking this way, the better.

Meanwhile, in response to the current upheavals within the Roman Catholic Church, we are going to see a new denomination arise, with either loose ties to Rome or none at all, let's call it the Reformed Catholic Church, which is going to look a lot like Vatican II Catholicism but with married priests and women priests and abortion, and people will flock to it in droves. The formation of that new church may blow the pinhole leak in the mainline Protestant Church into a full-fledged gusher, outpacing even current expectations of diminishment, but there's nothing we can do about that. It's all good.

Faced with these blurry but not bat-shit crazy expectations, and authorized by the Gospel only to tell the story, serve others, and sit still, what then must this church do?

In my humble opinion: (and perhaps this, Cindi Beth, is what the popular culture has to teach the church about getting its message out): consolidate. H. Richard Niebuhr, the patron saint of this fine institution, in one of his earliest and most prophetic books, identified denominationalism as the failure of the Protestant church. If the denominations of the mainline Protestant church continue to plumb the shallows of a hyper-mediated popular culture for clues about how to grow as an institution among institutions, selling an experience among experiences to a public identified, by default, as consumers, they will shrink and eventually die and their legacies will be, if not lost, shrouded, so clumsily will they have been protected. But if, in a moment of inspiration, they put down the countless crosses of their own internal denominational struggles and took up the singular cross of Christ, consciously overseeing their own preservation and persistence within a framework of devotion to God and God's world, I think they might all find a place from which to better serve others and grow in faith for generations and generations to come.

Thank you.