NO LONGER MARRIED, BUT STILL ENGAGED: THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE FACE OF DECLINING CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE[1]

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The United States of America has long enjoyed a distinct status among the wealthy western industrialized, technology-rich nations. Of course, what exactly it is that distinguishes America from her nearest ideological and economic cousins within the global family is open to some debate; and what one identifies as that distinguishing mark will depend in large part on who it is that is making the distinction. Still there can be little doubt about one American distinctive: her religiosity. Already in the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that Americans were an avidly religious people (DE TOCQUEVILLE, 1969, p.46-47, 432) . And while the number of Americans willing to label themselves as religious has been trending steadily downward, polls consistently support the notion of American religiosity. In a 2018 gallop poll on Americans and religion, fully 73% of Americans indicated that in their personal lives, religion was either important or very important (50%!). Additionally, 50% still claim membership in a church or synagogue; and of those polled, 22% attend religious services every week and another 10% attend almost every week. Without getting hopelessly lost in polling data, suffice it to say, that these numbers dwarf those of other western nations.

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But, as noted, the numbers are slipping. In 2000, those who considered religion to be important or very important in their lives was still at 88%. In 1995 those who identified their religion as "none" was only 6%. In 2005 that number was up to 10%, and in 2018, it was 20%.[3] Americans are still religious, but not as religious as they used to be.

Coupled with American religiosity, another hallmark of American ingenuity relevant to this discussion is the "separation of church and state". It is a sacred right memorialized and guaranteed in the first half of the first amendment of the US Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof….Thomas Jefferson, one of the architects of the great American experiment of representative government of the people by the people and for the people, went further by coining the idea of a "wall of separation" between church and state.[4] Reading Jefferson's thoughts on the matter, however, it becomes evident that the liberal statesman was motivated less by solicitude for the church and her independence from government interference, than a desire to keep the church safely quarantined to the realm of "spiritual" and moral pursuits thus leaving the arena of laws and government to those more qualified – that is, more enlightened and committed to the tenets of the liberalism he embraced. For almost two centuries, this careful arrangement of cordial separation appeared to keep all relevant parties satisfied. It bears remembering that within this rigorous structure the influence of the Christian church on American government and society was considerably greater than what official documents and pronouncements might otherwise indicate. This was the case in large part simply by virtue of the fact that the vast majority of the those very religious Americans were some form of Christian. Now, as it is commonly recognized, that amicable arrangement is coming unraveled.

While the present separation and looming, if not concluded, divorce between the church and the wider American culture is widely acknowledged, there is much less agreement both about why this has occurred and what it means for the church. A rather typical narrative among Christians of a more conservative orientation – which would include both those designated as evangelicals as well as those in the LCMS – is that America has been shaken from its solid Christian roots and foundation by the inroads of hedonistic, self-indulgent, promiscuous, atheistic, socialistic, and rebellious liberals of the academy, the entertainment industry, and the government, especially the judicial system. Lamenting not only

3 Gallup <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>, Accessed: August, 23rd, 2019.
4 "Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists" <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>, Accessed: September 19th, 2019.

their loss of influence, but the loss of a familiar, God-fearing culture that esteemed religion, patriotism, motherhood, and hard work (along with an assortment of other American virtues like baseball, automobiles, country music, and inexpensive lager) these American Christians yearn for a return of what in their mind used to be. They see the church as in need of assistance and so, they fight to protect the rights of the church as well as her people. Their hope, frequently and forcefully expressed, is to reclaim America for God and return the nation to its Christian heritage. Such thinking is widespread in much of the Bible-believing American church – even its Lutheran corners.

Other faithful believers are less sanguine about the faithfulness of the Christianity that is purported to lie beneath the grand American adventure of democratic rule. While there is ample and convincing reason to believe that devout Christian men and women were intimately involved in the formation of the nation, and biblical principles and influence are clearly in evidence in both the official and supporting documents that shaped the nation, there is even more evidence of the impact of Enlightenment thinking (also commonly identified as classical liberalism, modernity, or Cartesianism) on the structure of the government and resulting society.[5] Looking from this perspective on America's formation and progression through almost two and a half centuries, leads one to see the problems that beset the church and the wider society today as being present from the very beginning. Indeed, it can be argued that what is occurring today is simply the fruit of the seeds that were carefully sown on new world soil in the 17th and 18th centuries by America's founding fathers.

Considered from this perspective the twin distinctives of American religiosity and the separation of church and state can be recognized as significant contributing factors giving shape to the current situation in North America. The idea that religion was important and necessary but limited to spiritual and moral concerns and to be kept on a short leash in public discourse nurtured the now widely held idea that religion is intensely personal and private and not something appropriate for public display. Again, it should be recognized that this notion had little perceived impact a century ago when almost everyone was pursuing his private religion within the orbit of some organized Christian church. Nevertheless, the interiorization of faith inevitably led to its marginalization from public life. Add to these realities the Enlightenment's *summum bonum* centered on the rights of the sacred individual and that individual's virtual duty to pursue free self-expression, self-determination, and self-fulfillment; and everything is in place to

5 This is the story told engagingly and convincingly by Patrick Deneen. See: Deneen, Patrick. *Why Liberalism Failed.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

cultivate the democratized American religion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism that has been rightly detected and exposed as the de facto personal faith of the vast majority of Americans, religious or otherwise (SMITH, 2005).

The findings of the social scientists who coined the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism deserve special attention as they shed meaningful light on the current landscape of American religion, but before unpacking that topic, another significant fruit of the Enlightenment garden in which America was planted needs to be considered. Constantinianism is the term used to describe the symbiotic relationship of mutual affirmation and support between church and state. While the motives and sincerity of Constantine's conversion to Christianity are subject to debate, there's little question about the impact of his decision first to legalize and then to embrace the new religion sweeping his empire. The emperor firmly established the union of the cross and sword by convening and funding the first ecumenical council. Christianity had conquered Rome – or perhaps, Rome had inadvertently or even shrewdly tamed Christianity by inviting the church into the halls of power as its bride. If the marriage of church and state was not yet consummated at Nicaea, it was not long before the union was fully established in altogether tangible ways.

The cooperation and mutual influence or interference between church and state continued unabated in the west for the next fifteen centuries, or so – a fascinating story of political posturing, spiritual triumphalism, and personal and dynastic triumph and failure, with the pinnacle of power shifting regularly between the two poles. But, just as the Enlightenment drove the domain of religion from the community into the individual heart and gave us the privatization of faith; so, it managed also to challenge and eventually fracture the alliance between church and state. Today, the long and sometimes happy marriage of church and state is on the rocks, or more aptly in the civil courts. The marriage is all but over. The days of Christianity enjoying a place of privilege in the halls of western government are rapidly slipping away, if they have not already disappeared entirely. Since this loss of public prestige and status for the church is a relatively recent phenomenon, the casual observer might conclude that it has less to do with constitutional ideals and strictures than with the rise of the "liberal establishment" in whatever diabolical form that observer happens to detect it. It would be a conclusion understandably reached since, while the deliberate choice to forbid an established state religion enshrined in the Constitution of the United States may have nuanced and redefined the exercise of Constantinianism within America's borders, it hardly seemed to be the death knell of the Constantinian establishment. But appearances can be deceiving, and while It took

a couple centuries of Enlightenment ideals carefully put into practice to secure the divorce, everything needed to ensure that inevitability was in place already early in the 18th century. It was only a matter of time before the presumed Christian faith and foundation was supplanted by the higher and truer ideals of toleration, personal rights, and individual self-determination.

Before closing this brief consideration of the demise of Constantinianism and the attendant loss of the Church's stature and influence in both government and society, it should be noted that among Christians there are widely diverging reactions to the termination of the Constantinian arrangement. Some traditions have long celebrated the marriage of church and state – in the Eastern Church, Constantine still enjoys saintly status with his own festival day (May 21). There are those who point out that it seems preferable to be sitting at table with the emperor than to be the victim of his sport in the coliseum. And, of course, many American evangelical believers who still strive for the goal of one day transforming the country into a fully Christian nation consider Constantinianism as practiced through the first two centuries of US history to have been, at the least, aimed in the right direction. All who hold such views greet the divorce of church and state with alarm or even despair – dismayed at America's apparent newfound godlessness.

For some this new situation of expanding unbelief is a call to arms and the impetus for intense efforts to reclaim what was lost and somehow to salvage and reestablish what used to be[6]. For others, the end of the Constantinian union means that it is time for the church to retreat from the world in a new form of monasticism (DREHER , 2018). Still others, though, greet the collapse of Constantinianism with a sense of relief and even celebration. For them, the cooperation between church and state that was the norm in the west until sometime in the mid-twentieth century was an unholy alliance that corrupted the church, blunted its distinctive way of life, subverted its mission, confused believers, and obscured the teaching of Christ (HAUERWAS & WILLIMON, 1989). For these Christians, the end of Constantinianism means the possibility of the church learning once again to be the church that Christ intended, and not one that has been coopted and reduced to little more than a convenient tool in the hands of those who would wield power in the world. Whether one applauds the end of Constantinianism or is appalled at its passing, of course, hinges to a large extent on the view or confession that is held

6 This way of thinking, so common among conservative forms of American Christianity, is quite helpfully described by James Hunter. See: Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 111-131.

with regard to the church and world. Nevertheless, whether for good or ill, it is widely recognized that the Constantinian marriage has come to an end.

The shift in the American social landscape stemming from the end of Constantinianism describes one aspect of the new reality facing the church. The other significant factor is the rise of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) as noted above. Christian Smith undertook an ambitious research project encompassing the breadth of America culminating in face-to-face interviews with 267 teenagers from 45 states seeking to determine and understand the religious lives of American teens in the early 21st century. For my purposes, it is enough to consider a few observations and his conclusions. Smith found that while the vast majority of teens were quite conventional in their religious beliefs, those beliefs did not play a significant factor in the way that those young people lived or thought about their lives (SMITH, 2005, p.120). Smith summarizes it this way, "religion seems to become rather compartmentalized and backgrounded in the lived experiences of most U.S. teens" (SMITH, 2005, p.131). But there are bigger concerns. What the teens, even the "religious" ones, actually believe is far-removed from anything resembling orthodox Christianity. Rather, based on their research, the authors of the study "suggest that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers is what we might well call 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.'" (SMITH, 2005, p.162) This religion, such as it is, holds a "confession" with five tenets, that are worth considering in full:

> 1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
>
> 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
>
> 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
>
> 4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
>
> 5. Good people go to heaven when they die (SMITH, 2005, p.162-163).

Clearly, this generic "faith" bears at best only the remotest superficial resemblance to orthodox Christianity. It is, however, the dominant, de facto religion of North America; and it animates and informs what passes for religious thinking or spirituality in the American zeitgeist. As Smith points out, the teens in his study were quite conventional – they learned their "religion" from home, adopting without much thought the ideas and practices of their parents. To be clear, it would be a mistake to think of MTD as the religion only of teens; it is the pragmatic and common religion of all Americans.

Obviously, drawing conclusions about what "everyone" or even "most people" might believe is hazardous. The author of the study pointedly writes that his thesis is offered "somewhat tentatively as less than a conclusive fact but more than mere conjecture" (SMITH, 2005, p.162). I suspect, however, that Smith, as any authentic scholar has learned to do, is merely hedging his academic bets. He has done his research – research which certainly resonates with experience. It is not hyperbolic to suggest that anyone spending time in America and interacting with its citizens at some level of religious engagement is able immediately to recognize the tenets of MTD in countless real-life examples. One could perhaps quibble with Smith's choice of terms, moralistic therapeutic deism, but the reality he identifies with them absolutely rings true as the religion of America.

The religious sensibilities of Americans and the MTD that describes them, are of course but aspects of a much larger picture of American society in the 21st century. The present mood in America, and to varying degrees in the western world in general, has been labelled provocatively as "normal nihilism". This is the designation coined by sociologist, James Edwards who in the space of a few dozen pages boldly traces the cultural impact of religion in the west from before Moses to the present under four broad ages or epochs: "the age of the gods, the age of Idealism, the age of Cartesian ego-subjectivity, and the age of transvalued values (EDWARDS, 1997, p.10-11)". Edwards tells his story convincingly, and provides an account that makes sense of the move from a time when a king's call for a day of national fasting and sacrifice to the local deity to avert a pending disaster would have been met with ready compliance by the citizens, to the present when the mildest and kindest reactions of the citizenry to a similar plea from a head of state would be bemusement and incredulity. Too many factors to mention have worked with inexorable force and created the mood of normal nihilism now regnant in America.

It needs to be understood that the nihilism of normal nihilism should not be identified with the narrow sort of nihilism typically conjured in the imagination – the word evoking images of anti-establishment anarchists wielding Molotov cocktails or gaunt, humorless, utterly cynical and disaffected college students garbed in dark colors and absorbed in fervent discussions about the enduring meaning of the myth of Sisyphus. No, Edwards' nihilists are the shopkeeper who runs the corner market, the retired veteran next door, the workmate in the neighboring cubicle, the captain of the cheerleader squad, the truck driver who delivers your stuff from Amazon. For Edwards, everyone is a nihilist; it is simply a normal part of modern life. To be a nihilist is to be compelled to live in a world where *nothing* has any more weight or significance than what any given person chooses

to give to it. Edwards offers this explanation: "To be a normal nihilist is just to acknowledge that however fervent and essential one's commitment to a particular set of values, that's all one ever has: a commitment to some particular set of values"(EDWARDS, 1997, p.47). The point is that the Enlightenment search for ultimate truth yielded the truth that there is no truth, that is, nothing that can be proven to be universally true for all; rather there are only endless options available that one must choose to value and perhaps even try to elevate to the status of truth whether merely personal or, more ambitiously, universal. Once Descartes made the self the center and the final arbiter of all that is, normal nihilism, argues Edwards, was inevitable.

Edwards illustrates the world of normal nihilism with the image of a sprawling multi-level shopping mall, a fixture in the American landscape at the turn of the 21st century. Each store in the mall offers a different world that the shopper may choose to enter and inhabit. When one grows weary of living the fashionable Polo life, or the rugged outdoor life of REI, or the techie life of Apple, another store down the hall beckons with another set of values to be imbibed and adopted. But no store can lay claim to be the one, ultimate store – the very idea is ludicrous. The recent and formerly inconceivable reality of the rapid demise and pending extinction of the regional shopping mall – the victim of the still new world of on-line shopping led by the juggernaut, Amazon – only proves the remarkable accuracy and prescience of Edwards. The triumph of the individual is all but complete…one no longer needs even a mall or a retail shop to guide and provide his personal choices and preferences. So, it is with the values and the "truths" that direct and animate people's lives today. Every single value – whether the effort to stem climate change, the cultivation of the visual arts, the fight against childhood cancer, the celebration and idolization of FC Barcelona, or the devotion of an Augustinian hermit – is but another option with none being able to lay any sort of ultimate claim on any person. One simply chooses what one values, and everyone is free to choose the world he prefers – at least the one he chooses today.

Edwards' story is not, however, one of triumph or celebration. No, he tells his story with a sober and concerned tone. A professed atheist, Edwards nevertheless laments the loss of religion's ability to bring meaning to our living. He must admit the hard truth that the present mood of normal nihilism means "the loss of any value's power to ground one's life in a finally convincing way" (EDWARDS, 1997, p.51). If whatever I choose to value has value only because I have chosen to value it, then in reality it has no value. There is nothing that inheres in anything that can take hold of me and direct my life in a way that matters. There is nothing left for which one could be asked to die, and so nothing left for which one could

be asked to live. The loss of all meaning that attends normal nihilism threatens to make life pointless and absurd. Aware of this, Edwards sets as his project an effort to find purpose and meaning in a world of normal nihilism. He declares: "we don't need to find a god to worship, but we do need *something* that – as the 'true world' formerly did – simultaneously both limits and challenges our range of conceivable self-descriptions" (EDWARDS, 1997, p.56). Others have followed in the train of Edwards. In *All Things Shining*, authors Dreyfus and Kelly search through western literature in the hope of finding something real that can grasp a person and bring meaning to living. They hold out as exemplary the spirit of the ancient Greeks who, the authors believe, lived in tune with the world around them and recognized forces greater than themselves at work in their world and so strove to live in sync with those forces (DREYFUS, HUBERT, KELLY, 2011). Those who are paying attention and thinking about life and the world are desperate for meaning. Those who are simply living their lives as unknowing and unthinking normal nihilists are likewise desperate for meaning – though most are not able to articulate it so succinctly.

This then, is the world in which the church now operates in the north American situation. The take-no-prisoners campaign of the Enlightenment has gutted Constantinianism and stripped Christianity of its former prestige and clout. Concurrently, the Enlightenment's scorched-earth march through the world of metaphysics, faith, and religious piety has left in its wake a pragmatically useful, benignly tolerant, and individually malleable religion of the masses: the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism readily embraced by persistently religious Americans eager to honor all that made America great. And pervading all of this, the dominant mood of the culture is normal nihilism where everything of value is only that: a value that can be adopted, traded, and dismissed as easily as one selects a wardrobe, embarks on a fresh hobby, or starts to fraternize with a new-found favorite football team. This is the reality in America, and if in your world this portrait is yet unfamiliar, gaining familiarity with it now will likely prove helpful in the near future as America continues to extend the scope of its exports. It does not seem too implausible to suggest that the American gestalt is coming soon to a culture near you.

At last, then, we are ready for the point of this paper. What, precisely is the church – the orthodox, faithful church that follows Christ and treasures the legacy of Luther and all other faithful disciples of Jesus – supposed to do? What is the role of the church, today? Given all that has gone before, one might expect the answer to be desperately complicated, laden with daunting philosophical and sociological accounts and arguments, and capped with a few weighty theological

flourishes. Some have offered just such solutions. However, precisely because of all that went before, the answer can now present itself in its wonderful simplicity and power. The church must eschew all else, and resolutely follow her Lord with tenacity, trust, and a seeming indifference to the clamor of the world around. The role of the church is to be the church.

Of course, not all Lutherans in America interpret this familiar dictum the same way. In fact, one would encounter not the slightest difficulty in finding within the multitude of those professing to be conservative Lutherans, various adherents to the faith who will align themselves with virtually every suggested popular response to the nihilistic, anti-Christian reality that surrounds the church. Some endorse the sort of studied and strategic retreat from society favored by Dreher and his Benedict option. These Lutherans may not know Dreher's name, but like him support the idea of a church that clings to its own ways of doing things and deems anything done in the name of relevance or contextualization as a form of betrayal bordering on heresy. Others, indeed, many others at the congregational level, slide readily into the orbit of fundamentalist Christians popularly labeled as evangelicals. Recognizing common ground between faithful Lutheran confession and evangelical tenets such as biblical inspiration and authority, the full divinity and corporeal second coming of Christ, and the importance of moral imperatives for the structuring of life, these Lutherans cement and extend their alliance with evangelicals and begin to battle alongside them for the re-assertion of Christian truths into American society. This sort of response can be detected in all levels of the LCMS. Lutheran congregations organizing excursions to Ken Ham's Ark Encounter in northern Kentucky too often resemble a sort of pilgrimage into fundamentalism and its attendant dependence on rationalism as a vital supplement to faith. Renewed interest in apologetics and efforts to mount a persuasive argument for Christian faith entice some Lutheran people committed to tackling the problem of Christianity's decline in America with a full-frontal intellectual counterassault against unbelief. And still others in the name of influence and evangelism endorse a strategy of accommodation to the culture that would surrender parts of the tradition deemed non-essential with the hope of capitalizing on what common ground can be found and so garnering some influence in the areas that presumably do count. Obviously, those holding mutually opposing opinions generate a fair amount of strife and vitriol within the orbit of conservative, confessional Lutheranism; and all, of course, are able to mount impressive defenses of their respective positions using both scripture and confessions.

Luther provides a better way. Christians do not retreat from the world. They

do not tread the path of rationalism into the allurements of fundamentalism and adopt its penchant for confronting godless unfaith on its own terms – a strategy that seems invariably to leave more believers disillusioned and disaffected than unbelievers converted. Nor do they capitulate and seek ways to make peace with the culture in the name of preserving the gospel or maintaining relevance. Following Luther's biblical and insightful distinction between the two realms – the temporal realm focused on relationships within creation and the spiritual realm with its center on the relationship between creatures and the Creator – faithful Lutherans can find their way forward in the world of normal nihilism and do so with unbridled confidence and security. It is, it should be noted, precisely the hard reality of the culture's normal nihilism that makes Luther's biblical distinction between God's two complementary ways of operating in the world all the more necessary and compelling.

A rich and nuanced grasp of Luther's insights into God's rule of the world in terms of the two realms allows Lutheran believers to understand and undertake with zeal their place and role in this world.[7] They know that it is not their task to preserve the world, or to save the world, or to convert the world. It is their task, rather, to preach God's truth, both law and gospel, to the world. They know that it is not their task to convince the world to believe in God, or to provide a rational argument that will command a response of faith, or to answer every objection raised against faith. They know, instead, that it is their task to live the reality of the faith in lives that are inherently and unarguably compelling through their simple and consistent witness to the reality of Christ at work in and through them. These things they do both as individual believers in their daily lives as well as in the church as it is gathered in local congregations and in wider associations of Christians.

The central core of the Christian's engagement with the world is as simple as living in the sheer astonishment and giddy delight of God's grace delivered in Christ. The believer knows what it is to be claimed, overwhelmed, and fully ruled by the reality of the resurrected Christ at work in Word and Sacrament. He does not rely on arguments or proofs – though appropriate in their place, he does not *need* such rationalistic props. He knows the revelation of God which transcends all human understanding. To the nihilistic world, he patiently, repeatedly, and confidently tells the story of what God has done as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanc-

7 Many Lutheran thinkers have made helpful contributions toward this end. For a consideration of some of them, and an exploration of Luther's thought on the two realms and its implications for Christians today, see Biermann, Joel. *Wholly Citizens: God's Two Realms and Christian Engagement with the World*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017.

tifier. To the cynical he presents the compelling witness of a creature who lives not for self but, as directed by his Creator and Savior, for the sake of the other, the neighbor. This bold witness to the reality of Christ in both word and deed confronts the self-absorption of MTD, overturns the meaninglessness of normal nihilism, and strikingly takes for granted the all-encompassing story of God as the ultimate truth and so lives all of his life in relation only to that story. The direction of fit is unambiguous. The Christian does not seek a way innocuously to insert religion or God into his autonomous and self-chosen life organized as he, the creature, determines; rather the Christian lives all his life learning to conform and fit his story into the story of God, the Creator.

The implications of this Lutheran way of thinking about the place of the church within the world are many. They all stem, though, from a penetrating and powerfully productive grasp of the right relation between the church (the spiritual realm) and the world (the temporal realm). Few articulate this relationship more lucidly than Bonhoeffer in his remarkable essay, "Christ, Reality, and Good". He deserves to be heard at length:

> The Church has neither the wish nor the obligation to extend her space to cover the space of the world. She asks for no more space than she needs for the purpose of serving the world by bearing witness to Jesus Christ and to the reconciliation of the world with God through Him. The only way in which the Church can defend her own territory is by fighting not for it but for the salvation of the world. Otherwise the church becomes a "religious society" which fights in its own interest and thereby ceases at once to be the Church of God and of the world. And so the first demand which is made of those who belong to God's Church is not that they should be something in themselves, not that they should, for example, set up some religious organization or that they should lead lives of piety, but that they shall be witnesses to Jesus Christ before the world (BONHOEFFER, 1955, p.200).

Even to do no more than begin an exploration of the significance and implications of rightly grasping the dynamic interplay of the two realms for the church today would demand a book-length monograph, and this essay has already grown long enough. A representative list of a few provocative implications will have to suffice, then, to illustrate that significance and perhaps to stimulate the addition of further entries.

1. While Christians and their churches may be accorded rights by the

government, those rights are neither God-given nor inherent. Neither the church, nor individual Christians, should seek legal redress to protect their religious "rights" or interests. Such behavior is, of course, standard and expected in America, which is precisely the point: the church must not be perceived or act as if it was but one more group or individual jostling for a place at the public trough or fighting for a "right" freely to express himself.

2. Nurturing the community of the faithful matters more to the health, prosperity, and longevity of the church and her influence in the world than the preservation of buildings or civil privileges.

3. Christians should not attempt to make the faith comprehensible and reasonable to the world. Rather, they should strive to make the faith credible to the world by living lives that enact what Jesus taught. They should be a bright and dynamic community that contrasts dramatically with the surrounding nihilism.

4. The goal is not a Christian America, but a just America. The focus of Christian work should not be on national campaigns or causes, but on faithful local action in both the congregation and individual lives.

5. Christians have no reason for anxiety or handwringing in the world of normal nihilism. They know that God's story is the true story of everything, and that story ends with their participation in the eternal Kingdom of God.

6. While Christians neither shun nor flee the world, the church should be a sanctuary apart from the world, and children and families should be sheltered from the evil and danger of the world until equipped to meet, endure, and overcome the world through stalwart faith in Christ.

The contemporary western world presents substantial challenges to the church, today. The degree of the church's trust in her Lord and faithfulness to his direction will determine the church's response to those challenges. Christ is the Lord of his church. These challenges, then, do not threaten the church and neither are they new. It is heartening to recognize that the world which surrounded the Christians of the first centuries of the church bears a striking

resemblance to the world of the post-Christian west. Led and protected by the Holy Spirit, the church fared quite well, then; led by that same Spirit, the church will continue to do so today.

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