

End of the Line

God is shifting the church from one seasonal platform to another. Are we ready?

There is an uneasy feeling in evangelicalism today that everything is changing. Long-held certitudes are being challenged both within and without the Christian faith. The way things were even 10 years ago is no longer the way things are today.

Western Christianity has reached a critical juncture. We have come to the end of the line—not the end of the line for Christianity, but the end of the line for the track we have been on.

We are like people on a subway who have taken a train as far as it will go. The car has stopped, but we have not exited. We're sitting in the terminus, waiting for the train to start moving again.

We have two choices.

We can stay on the train that's going nowhere, or we can disembark, find our way through the confusing labyrinth of the new station, locate the proper platform for continuing our journey and catch the train that will take us farther down the line.

Changing Tracks It reminds me of times I've been in Paris traveling across the city on the metro system. If I want to get from Notre Dame to Montmartre, I can't do it on one train. I have to get off, find the correct platform and catch a new train. If you've never done it before, it can be confusing.

This could be a prophetic analogy for the heightened uneasiness we're feeling in this first part of the 21st century. We need to transfer to a new train, and we're not

quite sure which one.

We can be quite certain of one thing, however: The train we have been on will not carry Christianity forward in a compelling or engaging way—no matter how enthusiastically we sing “Give Me That Old Time Religion” as we sit motionless on the track.

It’s easy to be disconcerted by all this. During a time of pronounced uncertainty it is tempting to succumb to nostalgia, to long for some point in the past that we identify as the “glory days.” But we cannot go back.

The healthy practice of recognizing the contributions of the past and building on them is not the same as a regressive attempt to return to a bygone era.

Neither is revivalism the answer. Too often it is a naive attempt to recapture a particular past. It’s like a Renaissance fair—nice entertainment for a pleasant afternoon, but you can’t live there.

An idealized memory of the past is not a vision that can carry us into the future. Nostalgic reminiscing is for those who no longer have the courage or will to creatively engage with contemporary challenges and opportunities. All of this is related to the critical juncture we’ve come to in the course of Western Christianity.

Ride Over! So then, what is this train we’re on that is stuck at the station? I think it can be summed up as “Christianity characterized by protest.” We need to face reality—the “protest train” has come to the end of the line.

It’s been 500 years since the Protestant Reformation—when Christianity first boarded this protest train. At the beginning of the line, it was a way forward from the moribund corruption of medieval Catholicism.

But for all the good the Reformation did (and it was absolutely necessary!) we must understand it for what it was. It was a debate between Roman Catholics and Protestant reformers over the theology and practice of the medieval church, a debate among Christians within Christendom.

And that's all well and good.

But we no longer live in that Christendom—the one in which Christianity was the default assumption of an entire age, continent and culture. We live in an era that is, if not post-Christian, certainly post-Christendom.

Yet we make the mistake of trying to engage our postmodern secular culture in the same way the reformers engaged medieval Catholicism—through protest. This approach doesn't make sense and is no longer tenable.

The Reformation, though it brought necessary reform, placed us on a trajectory to become angry protestors. Protest is deeply ingrained in our identity. It's in our DNA. But Protestant reform is no longer the central issue and is not the problem. The problem is our uncharitable and ugly protest *attitude*.

Testy Passengers? To attempt to engage post-Enlightenment secular people with the gospel of Jesus Christ by protesting their sin and secularism is madness. It's a method guaranteed to fail. It is simply not the way for the church to move forward. We are in danger of being reduced to angry protesters sitting in the station on a train going nowhere, shouting at people who long ago stopped listening to us.

If we are going to persuade a skeptical world of the gospel of Jesus Christ and make a compelling case for Christianity in this century, we will have to do so on *their* terms. We can no longer pretend to be living in medieval Christendom or frontier America.

Simply citing chapter and verse and shouting, “The Bible says so!” is going to be largely ineffective. Telling a secular world that does not possess an *a priori* acceptance of Scripture that Jesus is the way because John 14:6 says so is seen as circular reasoning and unconvincing.

To persuade postmodern Westerners that Jesus *is* the way we must actually demonstrate the Jesus way as a viable alternative lifestyle. This lifestyle will have to be characterized, not by angry protest and polarizing politics, but by faith and hope and—most of all—forgiving love.

Because of our tradition of protest inherited from the Reformation, as well as the American Revolution, we have an ingrained infatuation for the angry dissenter who can “tell it like it is.” Whether it’s delivered by a pundit, politician or preacher, the rant has become something of a contemporary art form.

But this kind of populism plays well only with those who already agree with us. It’s cathartic and can “energize the base,” as we say, but in the end the angry preachers stuck in a paradigm of protest only further alienate an already disinterested culture. They deepen the destructive “Us vs. Them” attitude endemic in American evangelicalism.

Have we embraced, due to our frightened response to uncertainty and shifting culture, an angry “Ann Coulter Christianity” and made apostles of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity without recognizing they are simply entertainers and profiteers in America’s culture war? If so, we had better disembark the protest train before we are marginalized into complete irrelevance.

Now that we are a full decade into the third Christian millennium, it’s time to take stock of a movement that in Western culture isn’t moving forward much anymore. How then have American evangelicals come to be identified?

Largely by our protests and our politics. We are mostly known for what we are *against* and what political positions we hold. We have unwittingly allowed our movement to be defined in the negative and to be co-opted as a useful tool in the cynical world of partisan politics.

Excess Baggage But don't we have something better to do? Don't we have some good news to tell? Isn't it time for us to become identified by something more refreshing and more imaginative than angry protest and partisan politics? Might it not be time for a new reformation? And this time, not a reformation in the form of protest, but one in some other form?

The purpose of reformation actually is *re-formation*—to recover a true form. What is the true form of Christianity? It is the *cruciform*—the shape of the cross. The hope I see for Christianity in the 21st century is in a “cruciform reformation.”

Instead of using protest as a pattern, what if the church reformed itself according to the cruciform? What if we responded to hostility and criticism, not with angry retaliation, but in the Christ-like form of forgiving love? What if instead of “fighting for our rights” we laid down our rights and in love simply prayed, “Father, forgive them”?

Or ask yourself these questions: Does the protest paradigm look like the cruciform? Does the Christian who wants to protest every perceived slight with an angry petition remind you of the Christ who forgave His enemies from the cross? Does our grasping for power and privilege conform to the image of the crucified Christ?

Five hundred years ago Martin Luther and the other reformers looked to Scripture as the basis for reforming the church. I suggest we do the same. And I suggest we center our reading in the Gospels.

The great 20th century Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote: "Being disguised under the disfigurement of an ugly crucifixion and death, the Christ upon the cross is paradoxically the clearest revelation of who God is."

He's correct. The cross is the full and final revelation of God. His nature of forgiving love is supremely demonstrated at the cross. When Jesus could have summoned 12 legions of angels to exact vengeance, He instead prayed for His enemies to be forgiven.

Vengeance was canceled in favor of love. Retaliation was overruled in favor of reconciliation. Protest was abandoned in favor of forgiveness. This is the cruciform.

That evangelical Christianity has become identified by protest and politics instead of forgiving love is nothing short of scandalous. The disreputable behavior of celebrity preachers notwithstanding, the greatest scandal in the evangelical church is that we are no longer associated with the practice of radical forgiveness.

It should be obvious that forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. That should be obvious from the simple fact that at the most crucial moments the gracious melody of forgiveness is heard as the recurring theme of Christianity.

Consider how prevalent forgiveness is in Christianity's seminal moments and sacred texts.

As Jesus teaches His disciples to pray they are instructed to say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (see Luke 11:4). As Jesus hangs on the cross we hear Him pray—almost unbelievably: "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34, NKJV). In His first resurrection appearance to His disciples, Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them" (John 20:23). And in the Apostles' Creed we are taught to confess, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

Whether we look to The Lord's Prayer, or Jesus' death or resurrection, or the great creeds of the church, we are never far from the theme of forgiveness. If Christianity isn't about forgiveness, it's about nothing at all. And I am afraid that if we don't leave the protest train, we are in danger of making Christianity about ... nothing at all!

Tickets, Please We have come to the end of an era. We are in a time of transition. Things are uncertain. Old assumptions are being re-evaluated. We feel uncomfortable. We are trying to make our way through a confusing metro station we've never been to. We are tempted to cling to the familiar and stay on the train that has brought us here.

That is not the way forward. We have to find the new platform and catch the next train. The platform is forgiveness. The train is a cruciform reformation. If we leave the paradigm of protest, position ourselves on a platform of radical forgiveness and get on board with a cruciform reformation, the 21st century will be full of hope, promise and unparalleled opportunity for the church of Jesus Christ.

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