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“That’s Not So Odd: The Spiritless Church in a Post-Christian Age”
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It is difficult to say whether the church is in transition, is in its death throes, or is like it always has been. Stanley Hauerwas is more direct: “God is killing Protestantism in America, and we deserve it.”¹ We deserve it, continues Hauerwas, because Christians are civilized, their behaviors policed by success or failure in social and civic structures rather than being oriented to Jesus. Why is this the state of affairs of the Christian church in America? What is so different about the church NOW that is unlike any other period in its history? It is fascinating to think that at one point in the church’s early history, the apologists had to defend against the accusation that Christians were drinking the blood of children. There was also the prospect of martyrdom in defense of the faith, accounts of which are meant to be a spiritual motivation for others to follow the same path and to display to the world that the Christian faith is not some other Galilean cult, but is a faith that is sustained by God and founded in God’s Son, Jesus Christ.²

Not that we would want to return to the age of martyrdom and seek to be accused of infanticide, but the very *oddity* of the church with its propositions of faith, are what give the church the unique qualities that distinguish it from other institutions. The fact of the matter is that in this post-Christian age, the church is not all that strange or odd.³ The Western world is too used to the church. Contextually, I primarily speak of United Methodist churches in the United States, where the church’s beliefs and practices largely have been undermined to serve the ends of a post-Christian people interested in a cultural recreational religion (if any at all), not the disciplined and social faith Wesley understood

¹ Hauerwas, Stanley. *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular*. (Durham: Duke, 1994). p. 91.

² *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for instance.

³ Perhaps it is only appropriate to speak of a post-Christian age in Europe and the United States, places where Christianity once was in the ascendancy. It is a commonplace to note that growth in the church is occurring in the Global South. Whether this points away from naming a post-Christian age for the Global South is question more for sociology of religion and postcolonial studies. Regardless, talk of a post-Christian age may not be appropriate for Christianity in that milieu.

Methodism to be or, much less, the nascent and unpredictable faith of the ancients.⁴ The cause of our malaise is the institutionalization and domestication of the church: the church made tame.⁵ This institutionalization and domestication arises internally by action on the church's part or externally through some effect of modern culture (some have pointed to technology, globalization, etc. as examples). The institutionalized church in a post-Christian culture does not offer a significant challenge to that culture because such a challenge would threaten the church's comfort with itself and reveal the extent to which the church has strayed from its foundation as the Body of Christ. The familiar and comfortable church is preferred.

This analysis is sufficiently well-known so as to evoke an ever increasing number of books on post-modern and post-Christian ecclesiology, as well as the manifold proposals from leaders for church "revitalization."⁶ The comforting effects of cultural accommodation were also well-known enough to John Wesley that he regularly preached against systemic Christian indolence and its scandalizing impact on Christian faith and life. We could also point to the Magisterial Reformers, St. Augustine, the early Christian apologists, and St. Paul as evidence that conditions like I have described have pertained in the church throughout its history. The teaching of Jesus to "Go and do" is a constant and strange challenge to those who would follow Jesus in any age. So, again, what is so different now?

The difference is that we regularly speak of living in a post-Christian age. The idea of post-Christian has "precise connotations as designating a religious position that was definitely theistic but which had abandoned the Christian myth."⁷ It is not my intention to debate the merits of the phrase, but simply to use it describe a kind of

⁴ I am attempting to describe something real and concrete, a direct experience in the church as a clergy person engaged in ministry. In the midst of thinking on and writing this paper, I have been involved in the kind of business that personifies the "familiar" church: resistance to missional change, resistance to efforts of discipleship, *ad hominem* attacks on clergy and staff, significant financial woes, and so on. I have made an effort to minimize the pessimism that arises from such a situation and emphasize the hope of Christ for his Church, for that is where my heart truly lies.

⁵ Readers will note the similarity to John Milbank's book, *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), to which I owe the general idea of thinking odd things about the church.

⁶ In the past two months, I have purchased five new titles that deal with various faults and failures in the church, often with prescriptions for bringing the church around. These are generally good books with reasonable and helpful insights in our ecclesiastical pathology, but the malady strikes me as more systemic than the illnesses of local churches.

⁷ Daphne Hampson, in *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought (post-Christian thought)*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). p. 530-531.

religious reality in which people will gather for worship, such as it is, to little or no effect, personally or communally. The institutionalized, domesticated, civic religion of Western Christianity fits this description.

In this paper, I suggest that to counter the deadening effects of such a religion, the church must recover its “oddity” as the strange embodiment of Christ. This does not mean that there is not a sense of the “familiar” about the church, for while the church may be odd, it is not alien, unnatural or incomprehensible. A church in the post-Christian age will identify with the oddity of the gospel of Jesus and be “at-odds” with that which seeks to undermine the gospel. Thus, a specifically and intentionally odd Christianity will be “at-odds” with a post-Christian milieu.

In the first part, I will briefly address how the church is not as odd as it should be, where the “familiar” church is missing, or missing out on, the disturbing presence of the Holy Spirit in its community life. This is the spiritless church in the post-Christian age. In the second part, I will suggest the outline of an ecclesiology of oddity, arguing that the desire to save whole lives is the principle purpose of the church in the Wesleyan tradition. When the church seeks to save a whole life it relinquishes its “familiar” role as the purveyor of vague spiritual solutions for cultural ills in favor of the distinctly “odd” role of offering a life-giving and disciplined mission against the persistent threat of death. The church becomes the source of the flourishing of life through the Holy Spirit who enriches and empowers the mission to save whole lives by offering the strangeness of holiness and the oddity of discipline.

Part I: The Familiar Church

The section characterizes briefly what is intended with the title “the spiritless church in the post-Christian age.” Mainline Protestant churches are dying due to their inability to become more than the institutionalization of a form of social/civic religion. These are the churches that will have a mighty row over the placement of the national flag in the sanctuary but cannot quite muster the same energy to help those in need. These churches thrive on the administrative duties peculiar to their situation, where there is an eagerness to serve on administrative boards that have control over the money and

facilities, while there is a severe lack of strong vocational service in ministry areas like teaching, witnessing, and service to the community.

A spiritless church has undergone a shift in identity from the community gathered as the Body of Christ to a community determined by institutional maintenance. Accompanying this shift is a corresponding change in the sense of vocation from an orientation toward the Great Commission to one of stability and order. This church is the “familiar” church, where communal action is defined as institutional survival.

When confronted by the distinct call of Christian vocation, the familiar church responds defensively. This response is rooted in the anxiety of abandonment and the prospect of death.⁸ The anxiety of abandonment is caused by the crisis of lost vocation. The prospect of death is, on a local level, the possibility of the closure of a local church. On a global level, the prospect of death is a threat to livelihood, to which global church leaders respond with protectionist strategies, which further speaks to how deeply institutionalized the modern mainline church is.

The immediate problem for the familiar church is the prospect of death. Theologically, the church faces death because it has lost its foundation in Jesus Christ. Practically, the church faces death because it no longer has the call of Jesus Christ as its primary mission, operating without the merits of the distinctly Christian mission. Michael Jenkins has suggested that the facing of death is related to the fear of the impossibility of resurrection, which is also the fear of what is unknown and outside the “normal course of events.”⁹ The familiar church is the one that maintains its existence solely within the “normal course of events.” There is no contingency planning, so to speak, for the possibility of the real resurrection of Jesus. Communal affirmation of a real eschatological hope (“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done”) is met with dread, as it is a

⁸ Anxiety and the prospect of death are suggested by Michael Jenkins in: *The Church Faces Death*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ Jenkins, pp 13-14. “When the church faces death, in point of fact, it encounters a critical moment when it may know the power of resurrection. But the church can only know this power in actually facing its death. Resurrection is not an abstraction, or a mere possibility; resurrection is an impossibility, that is, it cannot be counted on in the normal course of events. It is not a guarantee. It lies on the other side of that which cannot be known. Nothing can remove the risk implicit in death.” I have not yet decided whether to quibble with the idea of whether or not the church can face death as an actual fact, instead of speaking of death as a metaphor for the present state of the church. My sense is that the church, as the embodiment of the resurrected Christ, will not face death, but must suffer in the borderlands of death, victimization, and disenfranchisement in order to be alive.

recognition of an affirmed end coupled with the fear of death through the unknown. The fear of an unknown future, in the absence of faith in an affirmation of the known future of the Kingdom of God, fills the familiar church with dread as it sees only an end and not a new beginning in the eschatological future.

Thus, for the familiar church, the prospect/facing of death is very real. It is more real for those involved in it than the reality of the faith which that church is meant to communicate as the gospel. Thus, on the one hand, we could argue that the fear of death rises from a lack of faith in the promises of God. On the other hand, we could point to a failure of leadership, armed with a dysfunctional theology, which has led the church to place its faith in the false god of temporality and institutionalization.¹⁰

The question must be asked: why is the familiarity of institutionalization not desirable and, why does this institutionalization lead to death? A distinction needs to be drawn between the church as the “institutional mediation” of the gospel of salvation and the institutionalization of the church, which is intended for the maintenance of a system. Karl Rahner lines out the former distinction: “The historical continuation of Christ in and through the community of those who believe in him, and who recognize him explicitly as the mediator of salvation in a profession of faith, is what we call the church.” Thus, the church is “the institutional constitution of the religion of the absolute mediator of salvation.”¹¹ The church as an institution has a specific task: to be the Body of Christ for its time. As an institution, the church carries forward the tradition of the gospel and offers its histories, practices of worship, and theological reflection to aid in the task of offering the salvation of Jesus Christ. These positive influences edify the church (the community of those who believe in Jesus), and give it life and purpose.

Institutionalization is the establishment of the church within the social and civic hierarchy, as part of the apparatus of civil life. The purpose of such a church is largely social in the sense of providing an outlet for the shared life of participants. The gospel appears as an after-thought, and then only in an attempt to shore up the crumbling

¹⁰ Jenkins, p 14. “This facing of death can occasion a profound reformation of the church, which we have not yet begun adequately to explore; until now our anxiety has produced little more than a careening between the paralysis of our leadership and our frantic reshuffling of the same old institutional objectives and structures. Only by letting go of our grasp on institutional survival can we possibly recover our vocation.” I do not stand ready to accuse church leaders of failing entirely in their vocation, but it is an area of significant concern.

¹¹ Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. (New York: Crossroad, 1982). p 322.

infrastructure of a dying institution. Yet, to institutionalize appears to be a good idea, especially in this era of saving, having a nest egg, and retiring comfortably. The church begins to reflect the wishes of its members and leaders, rather than the mission of church reflecting on and changing the whole lives of those associated with it. Death comes precisely at this instant; that is, when the church is formed to fit the model of the times rather than modeling the times after the Kingdom of God witnessed to by the church of Jesus Christ.

The prospect of death in a familiar church creates anxiety amongst its members. This anxiety is the result of a sense of lost mission; that is, the people intuitively know that the church has lost its proper direction and is no longer engaged in the worship of God and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus. This anxiety creates and enables “bad actors,” the bane of every preacher who has encountered them. Theologically speaking, this anxiety results from the misperception of abandonment by the disturbing presence of the Holy Spirit.

Part II: An Ecclesiology of Oddity

The first part of this paper was intended to be briefly descriptive of the conditions of the church as I often find it, through direct and indirect experience. In this second part, I will begin to sketch out a constructive ecclesiology of an “odd” church.¹² An “odd” church is one that revels in the oddity of holiness and the strangeness of discipline. This church thrives and is made alive by living in and with the disturbing presence of the Holy Spirit as the advocate for the Body of Christ. An odd church lives on the edge of institutional demise by constantly threatening its own survival for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The model of the odd church is found in Jesus’ instructions to the disciples, as they are sent out to proclaim the good news: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the

¹² I am aware of the difficulty in portraying an “odd” church off against a “familiar” church. The response from persons I have shared this thesis with has overwhelming pointed to the necessity of a familiar church in order to describe an odd one. Other responses have suggested that I am setting up a dialectic that cannot be resolved. I agree that this is a conceptual difficulty, especially since it is clear that the “familiar” church is undesirable. Recently, my thoughts have turned to redesigning the section on the familiar church to talk more specifically and theologically about institutionalization, describing instead the “institutionalized” church rather than “familiar.”

lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food” (Matthew 10: 7-10 NRSV). Jesus sends the disciples out to proclaim the gospel, depending solely on God’s provision. In these days, such trust in providence as a measure of faith is odd. For the church and for Christianity, this begins with Jesus.

Jesus, Trinity, and Church

Without Jesus Christ, there is no church. There would be no possibility for the familiar church to die or the odd church to be odd. Jesus is the founder of the church and remains its Lord throughout history. The founding of the church is an event and act of grace. As such, the church is not a perennial community, constituted and maintained through its own internal power. It constantly must be formed and reformed around the gospel of Jesus. The confessional prayer of the church recognizes the necessity of this constant communal spiritual reformation, saying: “We have failed to be an obedient church, we have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.”¹³ This prayer is a cry for the love of God to reign again in the church. It is recognizing that the church itself has sinned in its lack of trust in God’s provision and instruction and seeks to be reformed into the image of the Body of Christ.

Jürgen Moltmann describes a christocentric church in which the identification of the church with social/civic religion will lead the church to alienation from its mission under the crucified Christ. He writes that “The crisis of the church in present-day society is not merely the critical choice between assimilation or retreat into the ghetto, but the crisis of its own existence as the church of the crucified Christ...for only by Christ is it possible to tell what is a Christian church and what is not. Whether or not Christianity, in an alienated, divided and oppressive society, itself becomes alienated, divided and an accomplice of oppression, is ultimately decided only by whether the crucified Christ is a

¹³ The United Methodist Service of Word and Table I.

stranger to it or the Lord who determines the form of its existence.”¹⁴ For Moltmann, the image of the Body of Christ is the image of the crucified Christ. The church reflects, and is, the image of Christ when it participates in the world as Christ did. The work of the church, so the speak, is to re-enact, in the spirit of eschatological hope, the ministry of Jesus in loving and suffering.¹⁵

With Christ as the founder of the church, the church is formed in response to and in order to proclaim the strange encounter of God with humankind in the incarnation and the resurrection. These historical events are signs of divine love, made intelligible for us by the actions and teaching of Jesus in history. In the trinitarian analysis, Jesus Christ as the revealed love of God opens up the knowledge of God’s desire for our salvation through what has been revealed in Christ and what is advocated of God by the Holy Spirit. The mission of the church is to dwell and order its life in the love, knowledge, and advocacy of God as Trinity.

Briefly, there are three moments of action for the church related to this trinitarian analysis. The first moment in the love, knowledge and advocacy of God is manifested as trust. The church trusts that the promises of God are true and have been fulfilled in the ministry of Christ and are being fulfilled in the ministry of the Spirit. The second moment is vocation. The church relies on its trust in God for the call to the ministry of the Kingdom. In this way, the church will form its life around faith and in the calling of God to ministry in the world. The third moment is provision. The church has the faith that its vocation will be nurtured and fulfilled through the providential care of God. These moments correspond to ways in which the odd church is against the fears that characterize the familiar church.

¹⁴ Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). p 3.

¹⁵ Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope*. (London, SCM Press, 1967). pp.304-338. In this final chapter of the *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann describes the church as the agent of God’s work in history, oriented toward the eschatological future hope: “The Christian Church which follows Christ’s mission to the world is engaged also in following Christ’s service of the world. It has its nature as the body of the crucified and risen Christ only where in specific acts of service it is obedient to its mission to the world. Its existence is completely bound to the fulfilling of its service. For this reason it is nothing in itself, but all that it is, it is in existing for others.” p. 327.

Against Abandonment

The odd church lives in the presence of the Advocate, whose presence undermines and overcomes the anxiety of abandonment with compassion, instruction, and guidance.¹⁶ In John's farewell discourse Jesus instructed the disciples to "not let your hearts be troubled." Again, in speaking further about the characteristics of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14: 26-27, NRSV). The presence of the Spirit, perceived through faith in the promises of God, releases the anxiety of fear and restores the church and its members to full life in Christ. This is a characteristic Wesleyan claim that the grace of God is therapeutic.¹⁷ Maddox writes that Holy Spirit is at the center of Wesley's conception of the Christian life, "that Wesley *equated* the Holy Spirit with God's gracious empowering presence restored through Christ."¹⁸ While Wesley never ventured "systematically" into pneumatology, he was often satisfied to write about the Holy Spirit by emphasizing the convicting nature and presence of the

¹⁶ The church's doctrine of the Spirit is an area in which modern theology is impoverished, although it is a ripe topic for the theological engagement with the political, especially through addressing the nature of the Advocate.

¹⁷ J. Wesley, sermon "Original Sin" *Works* (Jackson ed., vol. 6, p 64). "We may learn from hence, in the Third place, what is the proper nature of religion, of the religion of Jesus Christ. It is *therapeia psuches*, God's method of healing a soul which is thus diseased. Hereby the great Physician of souls applies medicines to heal this sickness; to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties. God heals all our Atheism by the knowledge of Himself, and of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent; by giving us faith, a divine evidence and conviction of God, and of the things of God, — in particular, of this important truth, "Christ loved me, and gave himself for me." By repentance and lowliness of heart, the deadly disease of pride is healed; that of self will by resignation, a meek and thankful submission to the will of God; and for the love of the world in all its branches, the love of God is the sovereign remedy. Now, this is properly religion, "faith" thus "working by love;" working the genuine meek humility, entire deadness to the world, with a loving, thankful acquiescence in, and conformity to, the whole will and word of God. 4. Indeed, if man were not thus fallen, there would be no need of all this. There would be no occasion for this work in the heart, this renewal in the spirit of our mind." Maddox has pointed out the importance of *therapeia* in Wesley, especially as it pertains to the doctrine of God and human salvation. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, pp 62-3; 112-3; 121-3;144-5.

¹⁸ Maddox, Randy. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994). p 199.

Spirit, the role of the Spirit for instruction of the “law of faith” (primarily through the doctrine of the church)¹⁹, and the Spirit as a guide into a life of grace.²⁰

For Wesley, the Holy Spirit is the presence of God in life and in the church, steering humankind away from the death-dealing effects of sin and sin’s misdirection into the unnatural. As the convicting presence of God, the Holy Spirit is *disturbing*, upsetting the unnatural order of things established by a world run amuck in its persistent and pernicious denials of grace. The conviction of sin by the disturbance of the Holy Spirit is God as Trinity seeking set a-right (reclaim our natural, created being) by being at-odds with the familiarity of the grace-denying world and its celebration of fallenness. The church proclaims this as the gospel of Jesus. Thus, the odd church possesses the evangelistic character of calling sin into account through the proclamation of conviction and grace. This church, through the Holy Spirit, names sin in order to compassionately unsettle the settledness of sin and the sense of abandonment it produces. Abandonment is replaced by Presence.

Against Death

The odd church has as its trust Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected, who provides for and sustains the life and mission of the church against the persistent threat of death. Death in modernity is understood in two senses: spiritual death and physical death. Spiritual death is reduced to psychology, as a function of a disabled and disoriented mind. The fear of spiritual death, formerly in use in convicting of sin, is seen as debilitating, an adjustment disorder. Physical death is the great fear of modern times, evidenced by every effort to hold death at bay. The fear of this death itself is a sign of the lack of trust in the promises of God. The song of praise for God’s victory over death is lost in this instance: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:54b-55, NRSV).

The theological analysis of death confutes the two senses of death into one: the spiritual and physical are not separate ideas. The spiritual subsumes the physical.²¹ The

¹⁹ J. Wesley, sermon “Law Established through Faith.” *Works* (Jackson ed., vol. 5, p 459).

²⁰ The latter category he defended in his “Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.” *The Works of John Wesley* (Gerald R. Cragg, ed.), vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

singular fear of death, and death itself, is graciously overcome by the offering of the love of God in Christ. Is the fear of death also the fear of the promises of grace, as in the fear of the unknown? Again, we see the central importance of trust as faith as constitutive of the Christian life. While the end of death is found in grace, the Christian must trust in the promises of grace to overcome the fear of death. It is in the moment of trust that the new birth occurs, which is a reformation of the spiritual life and a reformation of the physical life, enacted by grace.²² The new birth is ultimately the promise of eschatological life in God's kingdom, but can begin to be realized in the wholeness of life *now*.²³ Death is replaced by Life.

The Church and The Spirit: Saving Whole Lives

An ecclesiology of oddity is aligned against abandonment and death and with the love, knowledge, and advocacy of God as revealed in historical/spiritual ministry of Jesus Christ. His ministry was “against the grain” as he sought to reform sinful life into a whole and complete life: heart, soul, strength, and mind (Luke 10: 27). This is the ministry that Jesus left to the church, inherent in sending of the Great Commission to make disciples. And, whereas John Wesley sought to reform the church along the lines of discipleship in

²¹ We are aware of the physical toll brought on by psychological stress. Without wanting to diminish the importance of psychological study, we must take caution to avoid separating the wholeness of life into distinct parts, where human life is separated into different fields and analyzed without reference to other parts. Theologically, the point regarding the wholeness of being taken up by the spiritual (it is equally possible to speak of the “natural” in an Augustinian sense) is argued by Henri de Lubac in *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad, 1998). De Lubac argues that “We are creatures, and have been given the promise that we shall see God. The desire to see him is in us, it constitutes us, and yet it comes to us as a completely free gift” (p167). More recently, John Milbank, following the trajectory established by the *nouvelle theologie*, especially in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003). “People are only guilty if they refuse the offer of grace and remain content with their deficient inheritance... Instead, the gift of grace consists in a miraculously restored desire for God, despite the loss of original vision and capacity” (p10).

²² J. Wesley, sermon “On Living without God.” *Works* (Jackson ed., vol. 11, p. 352). “He feels the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him; or, as our Church expresses it, “feels the working of the Spirit of God in his heart.” Meantime, it may easily be observed, that the substance of all these figurative expressions is comprised in that one word, faith, taken in its widest sense; being enjoyed, more or less, by every one that believes in the name of the Son of God. This change, from spiritual death to spiritual life, is properly the new birth...”

²³ This is an argument similar to, and takes up, Wesley’s argument for Christian Perfection, which generally has to do with “having the mind of Christ” (note references from the Journals so describing) and having the love of Christ as related to the commandment to love one’s neighbor (from the sermon “On Perfection”). In the tract “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection”, it is to be “inwardly and outwardly devoted to God, in heart and life” (*Works*, Jackson ed. vol. 11, p. 385).

Christ through holiness of heart and by the disciplined life, it is appropriate to claim that the principle purpose of the church in the Wesleyan Tradition is to seek to save whole lives in the same fashion as Jesus. The Methodists have already been accused of holding strange practices and principles, none of which, according to Wesley, are contrary to the Word of God and all of which are in agreement with scripture and the doctrine of the church expressed in the Articles of Religion (of Wesley's Church of England, primarily, but also those of the United Methodist Church).²⁴ In terms of being called names, the Methodists should have no difficulty with being called *odd*, provided their faithful practices of discipleship merit the term. To that end, the odd church in the post-Christian age possesses certain characteristics that set it at-odds with a global culture that is trending toward a massive economic and pseudo-social individualism.²⁵

To draw this very brief paper to close, I will briefly name and describe the characteristics of the "odd" church. The central feature, from which the others stem, is Holiness. The odd church is holy, so called out of its knowledge of redemption through Christ and of the redemption of each member. For Wesley, the holiness of the church was directly related to the holiness of its members.²⁶ Such holiness was encouraged and ensured by the application of Discipline as discipleship. For this reason, the odd church practices discipline, places gospel expectations on its members, and calls into account those who fail to meet the expectations of the church.²⁷ The discipline of individual members is the duty of the whole church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the

²⁴ Wesley defends the practices of the Methodists in various places throughout his works. See "The Character of a Methodist" *Works* (Jackson ed. vol. 8 pp. 339-347).

²⁵ Michael Jenkins, again, adds to this discussion: "The call to follow Christ is not a matter of individual piety alone; it is the vocation of the church in its corporate life. While it is true that the reign of God is not restricted to the church, nevertheless, if the church is not the church, its particular mission will go wanting. No one else possesses the church's calling. Ironically the church is most attractive when it pursues its vocation unconcerned with its own survival. But this fact tenaciously resists institutional manipulation" (Jenkins, p.32).

²⁶ J. Wesley, sermon "Of the Church" *Works* (Jackson ed. vol. p.28). "The Church is called holy, because it is holy, because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as He that called them is holy. How clear is this! If the Church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it. If this whole body be animated by one spirit, and endowed with one faith, and one hope of their calling; then he who has not that spirit, and faith, and hope, is no member of this body. It follows, that not only no common swearer, no Sabbath-breaker, no drunkard, no whoremonger, no thief, no liar, none that lives in any outward sin, but none that is under the power of anger or pride, no lover of the world, in a word, none that is dead to God, can be a member of his Church."

²⁷ J. Wesley, sermon "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity" (*Works*, Jackson ed. vol. 7 p. 285). "Now whatever doctrine is preached where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers."

responsibility of the church to attend to discipline and to not relinquish that responsibility to individual decision, where the hardness of discipline will fall prey to the ease of modern life.²⁸ For Wesleyans, the chief category of discipline is attending to all the ordinances of God: prayer, fasting, searching the scriptures, celebration of the Lord's Supper, and so on.

Health and wholeness, advocacy, and hope are the remaining characteristics. The odd church encourages wholeness in heart and life by emphasizing the importance of caring for the created body. The odd church is the advocate for those who cannot, or will not advocate, for themselves. Their model is the Holy Spirit, who is the Advocate present in the midst of the sense of abandonment and death. Finally, the odd church is full of hope. This is the hope for the reign of the Kingdom of God.

When the church seeks to save whole lives, it is bringing all of these odd characteristics to bear on the Christian life in an effort to follow the command of Christ to make disciples and to reform the world. If the church in the United States is to be revitalized, it must release its familiar role of stability and order, and seek to be shunned by the world it seeks to change. The ministry of Jesus is not meant for our happiness and comfort, but for our salvation.

²⁸ Albert Borgmann argues that the ease of modern life, which he would call the culture of technology, is an illusion of ease. We have just become used to technological things and practices, having lost the ability to distinguish real from faux-real (he uses the example of Cool Whip: not real whipped cream, it tastes good, but is nothing like the real thing). Borgmann advocates the recovery of focal things and practices that orient our lives around grace, for instance. See *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003).