RUDOLPH TUCKER BARTHOLOMEW, III
Reviving Orthodoxy: A Study of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City
(Under the direction of Barry Schwartz)

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is significant because the tensions and struggles between church and culture are more visible and exaggerated expressions of similar tensions and struggles, that in milder and more subtle forms, are felt in churches everywhere. Redeemer is an arena in which contest, negotiation, dialogue and resolution between the Church and culture can be viewed. In some sense, Redeemer's resolution to those tensions is a resolution for other churches in other contexts.

No century has witnessed the kinds of cultural and social changes as the twentieth century. These changes leave the postmodern individual homeless. In the absence of certainties and of relational ties, Redeemer's leaders started a church oriented to those individual most affected by these changes. Their message brings the past to bear upon the particularities of the present cultural context. Further, messages are not products for individual consumption. They are meant to bind individuals not only to a set of doctrines, but to one another. Redeemer's growth and success is rooted in the interpersonal attachments that characterize many within the congregation. Within these face to face relationships attendants and members hear and discuss the traditional message of the gospel and are urged to live lives of commitment. *Reviving Orthodoxy* shows that religious orthodoxy persists in much the same way it always has – through its message, worship and community.

Reviving Orthodoxy shows us that churches and communities may become more or less orthodox. Resolution to secularization is possible, but limited in scope. Further, though the creeds of orthodoxy may be appealing, they do not always lead to commitment and community. Ironically, in the absence of challenge, their use as commodities may actually strengthen secular world views.

INDEX WORDS: Sociology, Religion, Evangelicals, Secularization, Orthodoxy

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A STUDY OF REDEEMER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN NEW YORK CITY

by

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For Stacy

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CHAPTER ONE

THE CHURCH AND MODERNITY

The church isn't what it used to be. The argument is made both inside and outside the church that the culture of the church is not easily distinguished from that of broader American culture. Modernity, and now postmodernity, shape the religious communities of our day, blurring the cultural lines that once existed between the church and the non-believing culture outside of the church. Abraham Kuyper, Dutch statesman and theologian, once said of Jesus Christ that there is not a square inch of the creation over which he does not say, "Mine." Kuyper, as many Christians before and after him, believed that no aspect of life was exempt from Jesus' "sovereign" rule. Yet, "the storm of modernism," Kuyper observed, had arisen "in deadly opposition to [the] Christian element, against the very Christian name, and against its salutiferous influence in every sphere of life."[1] Modernity is ubiquitous – as near as the wristwatch you donned this morning. And its influence on the church is equally real.

Modernity is the social world that emerged from the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century – a world equally entangled with the rise of market capitalism, the technological and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century and more recently with the mass communications industry of the twentieth century. Traditional, historic revelation is displaced by modern reason. Providence is displaced by progress, which Lash argues is based not on the notion of a final utopia, but on the "promise of steady improvement with no foreseeable ending at all."[2] Public and private worlds are split apart. Technology alters the way people communicate. Face to face interaction is less of a

[1] Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich. 1931), 10.
[2] Christopher Lash, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, N.Y., 1991), 47.

necessity. The locus of authority, once anchored in transcendence, is re-centered in science and reason generally, but ultimately in the hands of the choosing individual. "What characterizes modernity," Philip Rieff observes, "is just this idea that men need not submit to any power – higher or lower – than their own."[3]

Postmodernism, as Jean Francois Lyotard describes it, is characterized by an incredulity toward all meta-narratives including those centered in science.[4] Postmodernism, then, represents a substantive break with modernity. Yet, postmodernism is born out of the modernist project.[5] The loss of transcendence, the rise of the individual, the divisions between public and private life, pluralization, the rationalizing forces of the market place and the emergence of the "consumer," all characteristics of modernity, reach greater maturity in the postmodern age. The postmodern social world is a complexity in which traditional, modern and postmodern narratives coexist and mingle. No one "sacred canopy" envelops the entire social and cultural world; it is a pastiche, a bricolage, "a hodgepodge patchwork of ideas or views. . . . It glories in contradiction and confusion."[6] Like, Zerubavel's concept of the "fuzzy mind," the postmodern condition "invokes a world made up of vague essences fading gradually into one another. Instead of mental ghettos, it features mental twilight zones. Instead of clear-cut distinctions, it highlights ambiguity."[7] The social world born in modernity and maturing in postmodernity gives shape to the world in which tradition – particularly, religious orthodoxy – negotiates its continuation. The adaptations and accommodations of the church to the "world" evidence the strength of these forces as well as the erosion of orthodoxy.

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[3] Philip Rieff, *The Feeling Intellect*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Ill., 1990, p. 280.
[4] Jean Francious Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (University of Minnisota Press: Minneapolis, 1984).
[5] See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (Routledge: New York, 1992), and Daniel Bell, *The Winding Passage: essays and sociological journeys* (Abot Books: Cambridge, 1980).
[6] Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J., 1992), xiii.
[7] Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life* (The Free Press: New York, N.Y., 1991), 115.

Conservative religious leaders have long noted that liberal mainline churches accommodated themselves to the philosophical trappings of the modern age when they yielded key biblical doctrines, especially commitment to the authority of the Bible. Such accommodations are obvious enough to detect. Yet, accommodation is not the sole property of more liberal churches. While conservative churches generally reject the philosophical commitments of late modernity, they are entangled with the logic of early modernity, particularly its emphasis on technique and method. Modernity's impact reaches all sectors of the Church. The question of accommodation is, therefore, broad and touches everyone. The accommodations associated with modernity, whether embodied in liberal or conservative churches evidence the erosion of religious orthodoxy – a fact disputed, welcomed or lamented. There is not a great deal of middle-ground response.

I write from within the Church, and I lament the erosion of religious orthodoxy characteristic of our day. Yet I am hopeful that erosion is but one option for orthodoxy; it is not a mandate. That commitment, as much as any other, frames this study of Redeemer Presbyterian Church – an orthodox church in Manhattan, New York. Redeemer is a church situated within the heart of a modern city, and as such, it reveals something of the tension between religion and culture, as well as its resolution.

Redeemer is 11 years old, and had a modest beginning in a living-room Bible study on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Today more than 3000 people gather for worship across Redeemer's three Sunday services. The church is flourishing within the city. Redeemer seems a success story. Attendance is up, the budgets are large and the church has multiplied into numerous new churches.[8] Further, Redeemer, though a single church, is an important church for study. It is significant because the tensions and struggles between it and the cultural forces of modernity are more visible and exaggerated

[8] Since Redeemer's founding new congregations have been started in Westchester County, Long Island, Greenwich Village, Manhattan's Upper West Side and two congregations in New Jersey.

expressions of similar tensions and struggles that, in milder and more subtle forms, are felt in churches everywhere. The problems and struggles of modern life in general, and of religion in particular, are writ large in a city like New York. Redeemer is an arena where we can easily see the contest, negotiation and dialogue between the Church and the forces of modernity. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, Redeemer embodies a resolution of the tension that unites past and present without compromising the integrity of either. Redeemer, thus speaks to the persistence and possibility of religious orthodoxy in our day.

Before we look at Redeemer any further it is important to set the theoretical stage for this study. The tension between religion and culture has a history, and in the section that follows we will consider the various ways in which that tension has been understood.

Church and Culture: A History of the Tension

Although the changes that have occurred within the Church during the modern and postmodern period are significant, the general tension between religion and culture is old, not new. The cultural changes associated with modernity and postmodernity enlarge and focus the struggle between religion and culture in new directions, but the struggle itself is as old as religion.

Religious traditions, wherever they are found, tread a fine line between faith and culture. At times, traditions accommodate the prevailing spirit of the age and lose themselves in the culture at hand. At other times, they retreat and remove themselves from the reach of the world they purport to save. Along with these reactions, there is what we might call reinvention – efforts to recover orthodoxy. Religious traditions interact with and respond to culture in a variety of ways. Accommodation, retreat and reinvention go hand in hand with religious persistence.

The Bible, Christianity's sacred book, is quite honest about the tenuous relationship between Christianity and its host world. The apostle John wrote to a church,

struggling to understand its relation to its world, that it should love God – not the world or the things of the world (1 John 2:15). At the same time, perhaps one of the most widely known verses of the New Testament, John 3:16, asserts that God's love for the world was the very reason for Christ's advent. Thus, the tension between faith and the world is deeply embedded within the Christian tradition. It did not surface with the advent of modernity or postmodernity; it is an ancient dilemma. The apostle Paul commanded the church of his day to be different from the world – to be transformed, re-born, changed (Romans 12:1-2), but he also urged the church to be "all things to all people" in order to win them to the gospel tradition (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Christians have long acknowledged and faced the tension between world and faith as a fact.

Both Judaism and Christianity, which grew out of Judaism, were minority religions practiced within their respective communities, but these communities existed within a larger religiously plural context of which religious practitioners had some knowledge and experience. Judaism, the religion of the Hebrew people, emerged within the pluralistic religious context of the Ancient Near East. Given the context of the ancient "people of God," it is not surprising that the Old Testament consistently urges Israel toward religious fidelity. Faithful Jewish families prayed the *Shema* daily: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord your God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts" (Deuteronomy 6:4-6). The prayer assumes at least the possibility of divided loyalties, and calls the one who prays to a singular devotion to the God of Israel. The 10 Commandments begin with a statement of God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. The first command – "You shall have no other gods before me" – connects with the pluralistic context of Israel. The Hebrews had encountered and would no doubt continue to encounter other deities, other religions, other world views, and in so doing would face the perpetual temptation to "have other gods" before

Yahweh, the God of Israel. These same tensions extend into the pages of the New Testament where they do not find resolution until Christ returns.

Christianity, like Judaism, emerged within a religiously plural setting, and it did so along the margins of respected society. One could hardly conclude that the early Christians were powerful, or that their religious traditions were widely held at a societal level. Church historian Robert Wilken writes,

> Christians, however, have long had to face the challenge of other religions. For the first four hundred years of Christian history a traditional religious culture (which was not, as once thought, moribund) set the agenda for many Christian intellectuals, and its spokesmen energetically contested what seemed to be the pretensions of the new religion. Since the seventh century a large part of the Christian world, Christians residing in the Eastern Mediterranean, for example, in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, have lived in the face of the seemingly invincible presence of Islam, and at a later date Christians in the great Orthodox capital of Constantinople, as well as those in Greece, Bulgaria, and neighboring regions, had to adjust to life under the rule of Ottoman Turks. Even in the Middle Ages, once thought to be a period of Christian spiritual as well as political hegemony, Western Christian thinkers were challenged by the continued vitality of Jewish communities in their midst and by the boldness of Islamic philosophy. What is different today, I suspect, is not that Christianity has to confront other religions, but that we now call this situation "religious pluralism."[9]

Christianity emerged within a religiously plural context. It did eventually explode as a world religion, embraced by the powerful such that most of the West has felt the grip of the Church in one way or another. By the time of Constantine's conversion in the third century 16 percent of the Greco-Roman population had become Christian.[10] But it was Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Empire that radically changed the social location of the Christian Church. Not all Christians agree the shift was profitable. It is argued that much of the present confusion over religious vitality and state within the present time is deleteriously linked with the Constantinian shift and

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[9] Robert Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mish.,1995), 26.
[10] Rodney Clapp. *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J.,1996), 13.

empowerment. John Howard Yoder argues that prior to Constantine, "Christians had known as a fact of experience that the church existed, but had to believe against appearances that Christ ruled over the world. After Constantine one knew as a fact of experience that Christ was ruling the world, but had to believe against the evidence that there existed a believing church."[11]

Despite the empowerment of the church in the third century the beginnings of Christianity were characterized by marginality – not centrality in terms of political power or widespread acceptance. Christianity was the religion of the have-nots – the socially, economically, morally and politically disenfranchised. Its social base was at best small, and for many years threatened and persecuted. Yet the early Church – limited in its resources – persisted apart from widespread belief or acceptance at a societal level.

This is not to say that the early Church was unconcerned with the incongruities between its "faith" and "experience." Biblical authors often refer to a larger community of belief invisible to the naked eye. Early Christians anchored their faith in an unseen plausibility structure – the invisible kingdom of God come in Christ. For example, the author of Hebrews urged readers to fidelity in light of the "great cloud of witnesses" who persevered through great suffering and struggles (Hebrews 12:1ff). The early Church was a suffering Church that struggled onward envisioning an unseen kingdom as a reality.

Belief in this kingdom-come was perpetuated socially through the worship, the preaching and the communal life of the early Church. New Testament writers wrestled with the tension between faith and the world and urged believers to persevere, to walk by faith in God's promises rather than by the world they could see – often a world characterized by obvious defeat, persecution, marginality and powerlessness, not characterized by noticeable advancement and broad acceptance.

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[11] Quoted in Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Church in a Post-Christian Society* (IVP: Downers Grove, Ill., 1996), 25-26. Also see, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Williamson, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tn., 1989).

Christ's rule as king was embraced as a matter of faith, not sight. Christianity began in the margins centered in an unseen world where power relations were believed to be different from those that adherents regularly experienced within the routines of their daily lives.

It seems odd to speak of the antiquity of this tension. We are inclined to believe that religion's shift from center to periphery is a new phenomenon precipitated by the advent of the Enlightenment. Modernity advances the "new," the "improved" and the "immediate" and it thereby negates or diminishes the importance of the past. Under the sway of modernity we are inclined to overlook obvious continuities between past and present. Yet there is much new about modernity – its changes and challenges are unique. The tension between faith and culture bears the shape of current ideological trends, but the tension is not new – at least, not fully. We need to appreciate the antiquity of this long-standing tension between Christianity and culture in order to understand aright the ways in which religion metamorphoses in the modern world and the possibilities of orthodoxy. There are unique challenges and perils in our day, yet there is a striking continuity between the past and the present.

The Church has always struggled with its calling to be in the world but not of the world. Churches everywhere resolve the tension. Sometimes their adaptations perpetuate the Christian tradition. At other times tradition is obscured or lost through over-contextualization or under-contextualization. On the one hand, the gospel tradition is lost within the host world as tradition goes the way of the dominant culture. The Church loses touch with its past and, thus, itself. On the other hand, loss comes when a tradition fails to reinvent itself in the moment at hand and loses its grip on the present – such a tradition is entrapped within its past, unable to speak meaningfully in the present moment, and so runs the risk of extinction, or at least of obsolescence. Church history is littered with obsolete, inculturated, institutionalized forms of the gospel tradition that differ in name only from the surrounding culture. This happens not because the culture

has adapted to the Church, but because the Church has either lost hold of its tradition and become something else, or because it has failed to reach into the present and reinvent itself for the present.

Even so, alongside such accommodations stand moments of renewal – attempts to recover and reinvent the gospel tradition in light of the present cultural moment. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century is arguably a dramatic instance of such renewal, at least according to Protestants. The Catholic Counter Reformation is another attempt from within the Catholic Church itself. Within American evangelicalism, the revival movements of the Great Awakening (in the eighteenth century) and the Second Great Awakening (in the nineteenth century) can be understood as waves of recovery. The history of Christianity includes moments of accommodation and retreat, along with moments of recovery. The church has not vanished. The gospel tradition persists through splits and fissures, accommodation and renewal. The tension and responses of accommodation, withdrawal and renewal have an existence reaching beyond the advent of modernity. Religion has not died.

The Peculiarities of Modernity

The differences associated with modernity are real, not imagined. The present tension between Church and culture has its roots in the past – the very beginnings of the Church – but there is a uniqueness to the tension and struggles of our day. Every age has its characteristic depravity, according to Kierkegard. Modernity's impact on the Church's ongoing dance with culture is substantive, if not wholly original. Early theorists of modernity and secularization assumed that modernity is of such a nature and force that its progress would eventually topple religion.

The demise of religion under the reign of modernity was once broadly presumed. Freud was convinced that the advent of science once and for all would displace and depose religion, which he conceived of as an illusion. "Science," Freud argued, "is no

illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere."[12]

Even theologians capitulated to the logic of modernity. Rudolph Bultmann, a prominent theologian of the early twentieth century, boldly stated, "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."[13] The claims of science, along with its advancement to the center of thought and inquiry, challenged the position that religious world views previously held. Power configurations were changing, and the Church increasingly lost its position as the arbiter of truth. A new authority emerged, which undermined sometimes explicitly and at other times subtly the plausibility of religious faith. Further, though the locus of authority appears to shift from religious ground to scientific grounds, sociologist David Lyon observes, that "in fact the main rule of thumb is instrumental, pragmatic: does it work? Is it efficient?"[14] Modernity sets the stage for deep bureaucratization, a shift Weber lamented and conceived as an iron cage characterized by extreme alienation:

> Together with the machine, the bureaucratic organization is engaged in building the bondage houses of the future, in which perhaps men will be like peasants in the ancient Egyptian State, acquiescent and powerless, while a purely technical good, that is rational, official administration and provision becomes the sole final value, which sovereignly decides the direction of their affairs.[15]

The effect on religion is profoundly deep – authority and role are challenged and redefined in terms of individual participation, and even more deeply its logic is fundamentally altered by the "sovereign" dictates of the market.

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[12] Sigmond Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated by W.D. Robson-Scott and edited by James Strachey (Anchor Books: New York, N.Y., 1964), 92.
[13] Rudolf Bultman and Karl Jaspers, *Kerigma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, edited by H.S. Bartische (S.P.C.K.: London, 1957), 5.
[14] David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, Min., 1999), 41.
[15] Max Weber quoted in, Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 38.

Religious views are implausible if not impossible. In the earlier part of the 20th century, Shelby Foote, historian and author, put this question to Walker Percy, the Catholic novelist and his friend: "How in God's name, can faith, no matter how desirable, be possible in this day?" Religion, Foote argued, whether desirable or undesirable, could not survive the onslaught of the modern age. Even the coldness of life in the "iron-cage" couldn't alter the facts. Religion, for many became untenable; its day passed. Secularization, the process of stripping the world of religious interpretation and authority, would dominate sooner or latter. The age of faith would give way to the age of reason.

The broad impact of secularization is less explicit as it is subtle. While Kosmin and Lachman found that Americans tend to identify with a religion, they also conclude that "[religion] exists within a secular framework, an outer shell of secular values. For what we have witnessed in the later part of the twentieth century is the growing secularization of a self-described religious people."[16] They argue,

> Religion in the United States frequently sanctifies the goals of a basically secular society, and the secular society affects and influences the very meaning of religious identification and association. It is therefore not surprising that America appears to be growing more secular precisely at a time when religious identification is highly pronounced.[17]

Indeed, the majority of those identifying themselves as religious also tend to believe that it is possible to be a "good" Christian apart from attending church. Christianity is individualized, in some sense dislodged, from an institutional setting, at least from the institutional church. Individualism and privatization have a profound impact on religious life and consciousness. Robert Wuthnow's study of the small-group movement within religious institutions suggests that though these groups advance the cause of community, small-group ministries and structures may also weaken the church.

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[16]Kosmin and Lachman, *One Nation Under God*, 279.
[17] Kosmin and Lachman, *One Nation Under God*, 280.

This happens as meaning, interpretation of the Bible and authority are relocated from pulpit to the individual opinions of group attendees.[18] Religion, though outwardly advancing, is deeply affected by broader cultural changes. Religious institutions, even conservative ones, may have unwittingly become carriers of secular values and commitments.

Secularization, however, did not take the course once theorized, at least not within American culture. Religion persists, advances, even thrives. Citizens of the United States are seemingly as committed as they ever were to religious traditions. One survey found that as many as 95 percent of Americans claim some connection with a religious tradition.[19] Despite the challenges of modernity, Americans are a "believing" people. The Church has remained intact. Fink and Stark find that membership in American churches is at an all-time high of 62 percent of the population.[20] Religion does not retreat. It advances – or does it?

Numbers tell a partial story. They show us information about church attendance and membership, about charitable giving, people's claims to belief in God, various religious activities and other moral information. Such information is useful, but nickels and noses tell us very little about the nature and character of religion itself, merely that religious institutions persist. But what are they like on the inside? What are the historical and cultural trends within thriving religious institutions? Has the character of religion itself changed? How do religious institutions resolve the inherent tension between church and culture? In what ways have religious institutions accommodated the spirit of modernity?

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[18] Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*, (The Free Press: New York, N.Y., 1994).
[19] Kosmin and Lachman, *One Nation Under God*.
[20] Roger Finnke and Rodney Stark. *The Churching of America, 1776-1990* (Rutgers University Press: New Bunswick: NJ).

In light of obvious evidence of religion's continuation, theories of secularization have come under close scrutiny and revision, if not abandon. Peter Berger, once a strong advocate of secularization theory has pulled away from his previous position. He writes,

> The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled "secularization theory" is essentially mistaken.[21]

Secularization is a slippery and multifaceted term used to describe a variety of social and historical phenomena, and its relation with modernity is, according to Berger, rather complicated.

Jose Casanova believes, however, that the concept of secularization, despite its complexity, is a useful construct. In his recent work, *Public Religion in the Modern World,* Casanova argues that secularization is used in a variety of ways to articulate theories of social and cultural differentiation, of religious decline and of religious privatization.[22] Casanova notes that with the emergence of modern culture, the old medieval classifications and structures begin to fall away, and non-religious sectors of society differentiate from the Church's authority and are free to develop on their own. Differentiation between secular and sacred spheres is a "general modern structural norm."[23]

Though Casanova argues that differentiation between sacred and secular constitute a general structural norm, he argues that, secularization, in terms of decline of religious belief, practice and privatization, is not a structural norm but an historical trend. The enlightenment critique of religion prophesied the decline of religion. However, according to Casanova, religious decline along with the phenomena of privatization are historical trends associated with modernity, not necessary consequences of modernity.

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[21] Berger, ed. *The Desecularization of the World*, 2.
[22] Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, 20.
[23] Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, 212.

Casanova finds empirical evidence for differentiation, decline and privatization, but he also finds that in the 1980s, religion burst out of its prescribed private sphere. He writes that the 80s witnessed,

> The revitalization and reformation of old living traditions and the assumption of public roles by precisely those religious traditions which both theories of secularization and cyclical theories of religious revival had assumed were becoming ever more privatized and irrelevant in the modern world.[24]

Casanova draws the conclusion that religion is here to stay, and more positively that there is a place for religious input within the public sphere. Even so, religion has not escaped its encounter with the modern without challenge and change.

Accommodation

The encounter between religion and modernity is generally traced along the themes of rationality, pluralism and privatization characteristic of the modern age. These three aspects of modernity are thought to redefine religious authority, undermine the plausibility of religious authority, and redirect and limit religious authority to the private spheres of life.

Religion, Peter Berger writes, sustains an "integrated set of definitions of reality that could serve as a common universe of meaning for members of a society."[25] These religious worlds are socially constructed and maintained. Berger argues that their persistence both objectively and subjectively depend upon the maintenance of a social base or "plausibility structure."[26] One of the greatest problems in modern times is that religion's social base is diminished. Modernity, instead of extending and unifying the plausibility structure, fragments the social base, disrupting the processes of integration. The modern world is a cultural plurality in which alternative and competing world views

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[24] Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, 225.
[25] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Anchor Books: New York, N.Y., 1967), 134.
[26] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 45.

are juxtaposed, giving rise to questions about the validity and viability of religious worldviews. Berger writes,

> Different sectors of social life now come to be governed by widely discrepant meanings and meaning systems. Not only does it become increasingly difficult for religious traditions, and for the institutions that embody them to integrate these plurality of social worlds in one over-arching and comprehensive world view, but even more basically, the plausibility of religious definitions of reality is threatened from within, that is, with the subjective consciousness of the individual.[27]

Berger is not suggesting that religion is doomed, as much as he is arguing the distinct difficulties that arise within the modern context. Resistance is possible. Yet, resistance is dependent upon "the construction of sub-worlds, of fragmented universes of meaning, the plausibility structure of which in some cases may be no larger than the nuclear family."[28]

Berger asserts, "the pluralistic situation, is above all, a market situation. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities."[29] The church wittingly and unwittingly takes on the shape of the surrounding culture, competing in the market place for converts. The pressure to become a vender of religious goods and services, to market religious products, is strong within today's religious economy in which once taken-for-granted meanings are commonly marketed for consumption.

The reach of modernity is to such an extent that even privatized religion is not beyond its grasp. Berger argued that the dominant logic of the public square, what Hunter refers to as functional rationality, infiltrates and dominates both the public and private spheres alike. These three forces, pluralization, privatization and rationalization, reduce and weaken the "plausibility of religious perceptions of reality among large

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[27] Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (Vintage Books: New York, N.Y., 1973), 79 - 80.
[28] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 134.
[29] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 138.

numbers of people."[30] Modernity, Berger concludes, leads modern people into "a deepening condition of homelessness."[31]

James Hunter builds on and extends Berger's theoretical perspective through his early study of American evangelicals. Hunter delineates the impact along those dimensions of modern life noted above. Functional rationality infuses "rational controls through all spheres of life" and consequently leads to a questioning of the veracity of the religious framework.[32] Through religion's encounter with modernity, technique emerges as the governing authority as faith is standardized and subjugated to "what works." The religious sphere in the modern world, like all other life-spheres, is increasingly subjected to the quest for efficiency, regulation, management and standardization.

Like Berger, Hunter asserts that the cultural plurality of the modern world undercuts "the social support necessary for maintaining subjective adherence to a body of beliefs," thereby, "creating uncertainty about the plausibility of an individual's worldview."[33] The cumulative effect of modernity cultivates internal doubts about religious commitments. Moderns ask, "Is faith possible?" Finally, structural pluralism differentiates between the public and private spheres and along with differentiation relegates religion to the private and less influential sphere, where religion becomes more and more oriented toward therapeutic issues and concerns.[34]

Hunter, wrestling with the persistence of religion within the context of modernity, argues that, though religion does not vanish, it does not escape its encounter with modernity unscathed. Specifically, evangelicalism's encounter with modernity leads to an increased cognitive dissonance that results in cognitive bargaining, not to religion's

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[30] Berger, Berger and Kellner, *The Homeless Mind*, 78. See also Peter Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in the Age of Credulity* (Free Press: New York, N.Y., 1992).
[31] Berger, Berger and Kellner, *The Homeless Mind*, 78.
[32] James Davidson Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1983), 12.
[33] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 13.
[34] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 13.

demise. As rationalism, cultural pluralism and tolerance increasingly characterize the public sphere, religion is privatized and its plausibility challenged. Religious institutions wittingly and unwittingly seek to reduce the dissonance by reformulating themselves more palatably to modern sensitivities. For example, churches de-emphasize difficult doctrines like election and hell. Instead, they primarily focus on God's love and fatherly care. Such concessions may be a form of internal secularization that results in weakened religious vitality if not its immediate demise. Hunter concludes,

> Evangelicalism has made certain concessions by accommodating to some of the pressures that modernity imposes. These compromises thereby allow for an easing of the cognitive tensions. To the pressures of functional rationality, the specifically religious and spiritual dimensions of evangelical experience are not translated into naturalistic rationalizations but are intensely methodized and systematized. To the pressures of cultural pluralism, evangelical belief avoids the abandonment of its exclusiveness by becoming tempered and civilized. To the pressures of structural pluralism and privatization, evangelical faith becomes embroiled in the modern phenomenon of intrasubjectivity to the point of approximating a hedonism and narcissism. In this, it avoids the "embarrassment" of appearing out of date and out of fashion. Thus, while evangelicalism has been able to maintain its orthodoxy, its cultural style is very different from that which characterized it in prior centuries.[35]

Accommodation is not new to evangelicals. Though evangelicals have sought to hold modernity at bay in terms of its doctrinal commitments that reach well beyond the advent of modernity, even here there is evidence that the ancient beliefs are recast in the mold of early modernity.[36] Evangelicalism's most explicit accommodations, however, have been stylistic adaptations, specifically its emphasis on technique. Such accommodations may contribute to the erosion of evangelical orthodoxy – and this, largely due to the forces of the "structure of modernity."[37]

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[35] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 130.
[36] Mark Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," *American Quarterly*, (Volume 37, Issue 2, Summer, 1985).
[37] James Davidson Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987), 240.

The conclusions of Berger and Hunter continue to be widely accepted. Lynn Davidman similarly argues that "religious groups exhibit a variety of responses to the pressures of contemporary life."[38] They strategize in the wake of the secularizing forces of modernity. These "reformulations of the biblical tradition" are "themselves products of, and responses to, these 'secularizing' forces."[39] Wade Clark Roof's generational study of the religious styles of Baby Boomers affirms the evidence of accommodation; Roof finds that even the most fundamentalist believers accommodate to the therapeutic and individualistic rhetoric characteristic of contemporary American culture.[40]

More recently, Marsha Witten, in her analysis of Protestant sermons, concludes that their rhetorical content reflects the dominant values and behaviors characteristic of modernity.[41] The evidence of the impact of modernity upon religion is not an illusion. Even so, Witten suggest that there may be limits to accommodation. Witten backs away from an "all or nothing" conclusion and admits that although Protestant sermons substantially embody the norms and values of secular culture, "accommodation is incomplete." She argues, "Religious speech still survives as a religious speech register; even in the seemingly most accommodated sermons, talk about God and about ultimate meaning endures at the center of concern."[42]

Religion and religious talk persists. Yet the point of the accommodationist argument does not center on the persistence or decline of religious categories or institutions themselves, but on transformations within religious catagories, traditions and institutions. Witten shows us that the categories persist as religious, that there is a lower

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[38] Lynn Davidman, "Accommodation and Resistance to Modernity: A comparison of two contemporary Orthodox Jewish groups," *Sociological Analysis* (Volume 51, no. 1, 1990), 40.
[39] Davidman, "Accommodation and Resistance to Modernity," p.50. See also Davidman *Tradition in a Rootless World* (University of Californian Press: Berkely, Calif., 1991), 32-33.
[40] Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (Harper Collins: San Francisco, Calif., 1993).
[41] See Marsha Witten, *All is forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J., 1993).
[42] Witten, *All is Forgiven*, 140.

limit to accommodation. Yet as Witten's analysis shows, the internal character of these religious categories are deeply affected by modern culture.

An Alternative View

Though the accommodationist conclusions tend to be dominant, there have been recent efforts to delineate an alternative view. Steven Warner asserts that the religious map is complex, and that a new paradigm, sometimes labeled the mobilizationist paradigm, is emerging within the sociology of religion.[43] This emerging perspective, if it can be called a perspective, is comprised of diverse views and lacks specific development, but it is fair to say that it seeks to articulate a model that accounts for religion's persistence. Institutions may mutate and accommodate, but those same institutions may undergo splits and fissures as groups within the tradition attempt to recover orthodoxy. Interestingly, this nascent paradigm places little value on a theorized homogenous world view; rather than diminish religious vitality, pluralism seems to secure the continuation of religious institutions themselves.

Mary Jo Neitz's study of Catholic charismatics questions whether pluralism "delegitimates the social reality" and whether "institutionalization on the societal level is the key to the plausibility of a religious reality."[44] Neitz argues that the communal sphere was always central to the creation and maintenance of religious life. The face-to-face interaction is the key, not the breadth of the sacred canopy. Thus, Neitz finds that in culturally plural contexts religious world views are plausible for the adherents of those worldviews, but they are not integrative at a societal level.

This, it should be noted, is not that far off from Berger's assertion that resistance occurs through the construction of a sub-universe of meaning distinct from, but in the context of, happenings at a societal level. Neitz's analysis is more concerned with religious persistence than with change. Drawing from rational choice theory, Neitz

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[43] Stephen Warner "Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in America," *American Journal of Sociology* (Volume 98, Issue 5: 1044-93).
[44] Mary Jo Neitz, *Charisma and Community* (Transaction Books: New Brunswick, N.J., 1987), 257.

argues that the existence of divergent world views is woven into the process of conversion itself as individuals weigh "evidence" – that is, they "rationally" evaluate the various components of the social realities at hand and actively choose one over the other because they perceive it as superior, more "real," a better fit with social reality. Secularization, Neitz argues, is not inherently linear in its progress; instead people and societies can "become less secular, as well as more secular."[45]

Christian Smith's more recent study of American evangelicals falls within this theoretical perspective. He posits that evangelicals are thriving and that even those evangelicals most entangled in the forces of modernity hold firmly to their orthodox beliefs in the face of opposition. "If religious strength is measured as adherence to traditionally orthodox beliefs," Smith writes, "American evangelicalism stands out as a very strong Christian tradition."[46] Smith goes on to argue that cultural pluralism not only doesn't decrease the plausibility of religious adherence, but that without conflict, threats and pluralism, evangelicalism would lose "identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless."[47]

Pluralism, in Smith's paradigm, is not an enemy but a friend of religion. Evangelical success stems not from its withdrawal from modern culture, but from its engagement.[48] According to Smith, proximity is key, but unlike those within the accommodationist paradigm, who posit that increased proximity to the cultural forces of modernity lead to accommodations of a weakening sort, Smith finds the opposite to be the case. He writes,

> In the pluralistic, modern world, people don't need macro-encompassing sacred cosmoses to maintain their religious beliefs. They only need "sacred umbrellas," small, portable, accessible relational worlds – religious

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[45] Neitz, *Charisma and Community*, 258.
[46] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Ill., 1998), 26.
[47] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 89.
[48] Smith finds almost no correlation between Hunter's proximity to modernity as a means of explaining religious vitality or non-vitality (*American Evangelicalism*, 75).

> reference groups – "under" which their beliefs can make complete sense.[49]

Like, Neitz, Smith finds that the face-to-face level of interaction is what sustains religious belief, not a sacred canopy at the societal level. He concludes that engagement with the culture at hand strengthens and vitalizes evangelicalism.

The differences between Hunter and Smith's conclusions are striking. Smith concludes that evangelicals are as committed as ever to their core beliefs, and that evangelicalism, as a movement, is thriving. Smith, however, notes that though his study employs the words "thriving" and "vitality" to describe the current state of evangelicalism, he does "not intend them to imply any kind of moral superiority or essential religious integrity or faithfulness."[50]

Berger, Hunter and other accommodationists, however, do not contend that evangelicalism is waning in institutional fervor or even, at some level, in its commitment to certain core beliefs. Rather, it is argued that the internal character is altered, that the notion of authority and the very defense of the faith is recast after the mold of modern and postmodern culture. Further, these adaptations, it is argued, are formative or transformative of evangelicalism itself.

Analysis of evangelical "vitality" is precisely a question of "religious integrity and faithfulness" to its tradition. Smith shows us the persistence of evangelicalism through belief and activism, but there is very little analysis of the interior spaces of evangelicalism. Smith's study does not address the internal character of religious fidelity, only the prevalence of confessional vitality. Further, Smith's notion of "sacred umbrellas," or Neitz' emphasis on the face-to-face interaction, is not unlike Berger's assertion that religious beliefs are sustained through the creation and maintenance of sub-worlds and small plausibility structures.

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[49] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 106.
[50] Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, xii.

Accommodationists and mobilizationists alike seek to explain the persistence of religion. Mobilizationists, however, fail in some sense to evaluate the way in which religion conforms to the culture – if not immediately in its beliefs, then more subtly through form, style and technique. That religious institutions survive is nearly indisputable. The effect of culture, however, upon religion is less clear. As Mark Chaves, has argued, study of religion must take up the analysis of the nature and character of religious belief in addition to the vitality of the institutional carriers of belief.[51]

Research Agenda

What is the nature of religion's persistence? Do modern, postmodern, therapeutic and individualistic cultural narratives overpower religious narratives, or are religious narratives able to stand their ground in the current cultural moment? Of course, there is no simple answer to these questions. Religion persists through contextualizations of all sorts. As Steven Warner writes, "There is a tension between the Church being in harmony with the secular culture (without which it has little resonance for modern persons) and being symbolically distinct (without which it tends to dissipate into the surrounding culture)."[52]

Contextualization is hard work – sometimes the tradition is blurred, even lost, but at other times it shines through. The fact of accommodation, however, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the culture at hand, modern or postmodern, is the cause of accommodation, or that accommodation is inevitable, merely that the culture at hand inspires and gives shape to accommodation and secularization. The weakness of the accommodationist perspective is not its description of historical trends within the church, but the almost normative assumption that proximity to the forces of modernity of necessity leads to a weakening or even loss of religious orthodoxy.

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[51] Mark Chaves. "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority." *Social Forces* (January 1997), 113-115.

[52] R. Stephen Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins* (University of California Press: Berkeley, Calif., 1988), 288.

Historically, the public sphere was not critical to the survival of Christian orthodoxy. The Church has long faced religious pluralism. The relegation of the Church to the margins of society is both new and old. At the same time, there is abundant evidence to suggest that the internal character of evangelical orthodoxy is deeply affected through its encounter with modernity. My hope is that this study helps enlarge our understanding of the possibilities of religious orthodoxy in our day.

Research Site

This study addresses the tensions between religion and culture and its resolution through an analysis of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. Redeemer Presbyterian Church is significant because the tension and struggle between it and the forces of modern and postmodern culture are a more visible and exaggerated expression of similar tensions and struggles that, in milder and subtler forms, are felt in churches everywhere. Redeemer embodies a resolution of that tension. The church is both a response to modernity and a repository of the evangelical tradition. Redeemer is an attempt to articulate and prescribe not only the "desirability" of faith, but also its "possibility" in the midst of the modern city.

Methods

In order to articulate the resolution of the tension between faith and culture, we must see the Church in action. This study is, in part, ethnographic. I am a long-time observer of Redeemer Presbyterian Church – sometimes from a distance, and for a short time, up close. Tim Keller, Redeemer's founding pastor, is a former professor from when I was a student at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He accepted the "call" to plant the church during my first year of study at Westminster.

I accompanied Tim on one of his early trips to New York. A friend of mine from college days was living in the city at the time. He and his wife became involved in the initial core group of the church plant. My wife and I visited them on numerous occasions during the early years of Redeemer, and on several nights we ended up in the Keller's

living room talking about the struggles and successes of the church as it encountered the lives of New Yorkers. In addition to periodic visits, I listened to Keller's sermons as a young student and in the years following seminary. Redeemer, it seemed to me, was charting new territory, which I was able to casually observe and informally study from a distance during its first years.

In the years following seminary I continued my graduate studies in sociology of culture. I was still interested in theology and, specifically, the relationship between religion and culture. When the time came to focus my research, Redeemer came to mind as a possible case study. The church is socially located within the highly secular, pluralistic and urban culture of New York City. Its audience is that of the educated professional. Redeemer could hardly increase its proximity to the forces of modernity. I set out to study Redeemer more officially, up close and personal.

Allan Wolfe, in his study of the beliefs and thoughts of middle-class America, writes, "In trying to find out what is on the minds of Americans, especially with respect to emotionally charged topics, we are best off not relying on surveys to provide definitive answers to questions about moral world views."[53]

Survey data has the appearance of greater objectivity and thus seems to offer a certain level of desirable precision. Certainly, survey research has a place in describing and understanding cultural trends, but as a measure of the actual state of affairs, surveys present a number of serious challenges and limitations that may actually impede understanding. For one thing, there is little or no room for personal qualifications. Anyone who has been called away from dinner to answer the phone only to find a pollster asking about drinking habits or cereal consumption recalls the difficulty of squeezing their response into a predetermined box. Qualifications are not allowed, all for the sake of greater precision. Yet, for the sake of precision, precision may be lost. When

[53] Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (Viking: New York, N.Y., 1998), 18.

not allowed to contextualize responses to questions, especially to questions of "great importance," Wolfe suggests, we may actually lose the desired precision.

I moved to New York City for two months in order to take a look at Redeemer from a more up-front position. This study is an ethnography of sorts. I qualify my use of this method, because my tenure in the field and the depth of participation was obviously limited. One could hardly claim to have become a New Yorker, or to have assimilated fully into the rhythm of the community of Redeemer in two short months, but during those months I lived, traveled, ate, tended to family responsibilities (my wife and two children joined me for one month), worked and worshiped more like one who lived in the city than like a tourist – a role with which I was familiar and accustomed.

For two months I tasted, ever so briefly, some of the same kinds of struggles and joys New Yorkers live with daily. The church staff granted me wide access to church activities and archives. I attended worship services, leadership meetings, prayer meetings, staff meetings, staff lunches, home Bible studies, Christmas parties and church social gatherings – official and unofficial. In addition to participating in the various gatherings of the church, I met with and interviewed over 35 members and attenders, many of whom had been converted under the ministry of Redeemer. I also studied and analyzed various cultural objects such as sermons, creeds, prayers, confessions, liturgies, ceremonies, rituals and symbols. Analysis of these objects along with observation of church gatherings and interviews is the backbone of this study. They show the way in which Redeemer translates its tradition into the surrounding culture.

Religion, as Geertz has argued, is a cultural system.[54] Its array of meanings, symbols, rituals and other symbolic expressive behavior can be studied empirically. I am particularly concerned with the tension between religion and culture, along with its resolution. In short, this is an attempt to delineate the "possibilities" of religious orthodoxy in the late modern world.

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[54] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books: New York, N.Y., 1973).

Specifically, I am concerned with the way in which Redeemer articulates and contextualizes historic Christianity and the meanings of its various cultural objects. There are obvious limitations to this study. Redeemer is one church, and one can hardly conclude that its state is representative of the state of all churches everywhere. I certainly don't intend that presumption. There also is a measure of subjectivity within this approach – "I" have observed, noted and reported those things within the church that seem important and interesting to me, and I have left out, even overlooked, other things that someone else might find valuable and important.

Yet, this study is useful in understanding the tension between Church and culture more broadly. I assume that all religious institutions face the quandary of contextualization. Redeemer is not unusual in that sense. The tensions between church and culture, however, are writ large in the city church, perhaps allowing for a more precise understanding of the tension itself, along with its resolution. Redeemer is one attempt to find a path for religion in the postmodern world, but there is evidence that its methods, approach and culture are increasingly looked to as other churches in similar contexts attempt to reinvent themselves in the late modern world. Redeemer, at least within its own denomination of the Presbyterian Church in America, is emerging as a model for new and old churches alike.

The Structure of this Study

In Chapter two I will briefly define evangelicalism, and describe and outline the range of adaptation within the evangelical tradition, specifically that of the "seeker church." In any period of social change, old forms almost demand updating, as former ways become culturally obsolete. The Church is no exception, and evangelicals are in the midst of a state of reinvention. We will see how Redeemer shares that vision of reinvention and how it steers a different path than that of the "seeker-sensitive" church, which tends to dominate current attempts at contextualization by evangelical churches.

Chapter three analyzes the history of Redeemer. We will see that Redeemer in very clear and obvious ways is seeking to craft a new cultural "tool kit" for evangelicalism. Chapter four takes a look at the characteristics of New York City and the people who attend Redeemer. Here, I wrestle with Redeemer's ability to become a community and to overcome very real obstacles to community.

Chapter Five is an analysis of the sermons and other discourse that delineate the contours of the gospel taught at Redeemer, Sunday after Sunday. Chapter Six looks at the response of members to the gospel message preached and taught in the church as well as at the difficulties of community in our day. Chapter Seven considers the problem of privatization and Redeemer's mission in the city as an agent of change. And Finally, Chapter Eight is a summation of findings, and perhaps more importantly draws conclusions about the possibilities of orthodoxy in our day.

CHAPTER TWO

REDEEMER AND THE CHANGING SHAPE OF EVANGELICALISM

If one word could sum up the current theological situation, it would be amnesia.[55]
-- D. H. Williams

Evangelicals and fundmentalists are two movements within conservative American Christianity; they affirm similar beliefs and doctrinal positions, but they are distinguishable from one another. Nancy Ammerman defines the difference in terms of "the degree to which believers are willing to get along with the rest of the world: evangelicals take a generally more accommodating stance on nearly everything."[56] In contrast, Ammerman observes, "compromise and accommodation are among the most dreaded words in the fundamentalist vocabulary."[57] Fundamentalists, Ammerman contends, "simply do not accept either the cultural pluralism or the institutional differentiation that have come to be assumed in the modern world."[58]

Evangelicals nearness to the world and specifically, the willingness to "get along with the world" has made for accommodation. Where fundamentalists separate from the world out of an unwilling to adapt to the cultural forces of modernity, evangelicals draw near and they have adapted. Accommodations in some cases have been subtle, but they remain costly. The boundaries of their moral order are less clear than in the past. Today, evangelicals are the ones asking questions about their identity as evangelicals. Several years ago an administrator of a prominent Bible college told me of his participation in a committee whose purpose was to define evangelicalism. The group

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[55] D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999), 9.*

[56] Nancy Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, N.J.,1987), 5. Ammerman observes that fundamentalists are identified in terms of their "separation from the world, dispensation premillenialism, and biblical literalism."

[57] Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, 4.

[58] Ammerman, *Bible Believers*, 3.

hoped to come to some conclusion on the scope and usefulness of the label for the Bible college. I am not certain of the outcome of their discussions, but such discussion and debate highlights the ambiguity many evangelicals sense.

Take, for example, an editorial response in *Christianity Today,* the cornerstone magazine of American evangelicalism. In the editorial titled, "If I'm an Evangelical, What Am I?," Timothy George, an evangelical scholar and senior advisor for the magazine, responds to the question of a confused "evangelical" reader. George answers, "Evangelicals are a worldwide family of Bible believing Christians committed to sharing with everyone everywhere the transforming good news of new life in Jesus Christ; an utterly free gift that comes through faith alone in the crucified and risen Savior."[59]

The question and George's answer provides an interesting window into the cultural confusion that increasingly defines American evangelicalism. But surely, evangelicalism is not a "family," at least for the reader who posed the question and presumably for other readers, who live with uncertainty as to what it means to be an evangelical. Do committee meetings like that of the Bible college and questions like the one published in *Christianity Today* suggest that the taken-for-granted meaning of evangelicalism is slipping from the public imagination? I believe they do. Evangelicalism is in the throes of change, its moral order unclear and uncertain, and discussions about meaning and relevance are indicative of the confusion.

Defining Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism is a slippery term. Part of the difficulty in defining it is that, unlike a denomination, evangelicalism is not centered in any one institution. Its boundaries are institutionally loose. Evangelicalism, however, is highly institutionalized. It is a conglomeration of institutions that may or may not be formally or even loosely linked with one another, except through a common culture. Some wearers of the label

[59] Timothy George. "If I'm an Evangelical, What Am I?" *Christianity Today* (Vol. 43, no.9, Aug. 9, 1999). 62.

are members of the National Association of Evangelicals, but membership in the NEA is not requisite to inclusion within evangelicalism. Evangelicalism has become a blanket term used to describe the religious orientation and focus of a wide array of churches, educational organizations, publishers, para-church groups, even individuals who consider themselves evangelical.

The word *evangelical* means "good news," or "gospel." Accordingly, evangelicals are often characterized as holding certain beliefs centered on the Christian gospel. John Seel describes evangelicals as "those who seek to define themselves and their lives by the demands of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is, evangelicals are those who have a passion for the first things of the gospel."[60]

The beliefs or "first things" of the gospel include, 1) belief that the Bible is inspired of God and is thus authoritative for all of life; 2) belief that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God; and 3) belief that Jesus' life, death and resurrection are efficacious for the salvation of those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Evangelicals are also committed to evangelism. Evangelicals tell people about these "first things" of the gospel in the hopes that they, too, might believe and be "saved." Beliefs are important to evangelicals. Out of these beliefs and in particular their institutionalization, evangelicalism, we could say, is a social and cultural movement of the "first things of the gospel."

The "first things" that evangelicals hold dear are hardly new. They are historic beliefs rooted in the history of the church. In terms of beliefs, evangelicalism has a long and enduring history within the church from its beginning. To speak of the American evangelical movement, however, is to reference a particular moment and movement within the Christian church, deeply rooted in the theological traditions of the Reformation, Puritanism and the revivals or awakenings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The preaching of George Whitefield, Charles Wesley and Jonathan Edwards fueled the first Great Awakening, and in the nineteenth century Charles Finney

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[60] John Seel, *The Evangelical Forfeit* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1993), 16.

picked up the evangelical mantle as the country moved through a second awakening. Each revival movement strengthened, shaped and gave definition to modern evangelicalism. At the same time, such renewal movements are themselves contextualized movements that interface with the emerging culture of modernity. Modern evangelicalism is deeply rooted in modernity itself.

Modern usage of the term *evangelical* is linked with a group of Christian leaders who gathered for the "National Conference for United Action among Evangelicals" in 1942. Their goal was to redefine the course of "evangelical" Christianity in America. American Protestantism had grown cold, lost its fire, its zeal. Fundamentalism was a restrictive if not reactive and negative response to the secularizing forces of modernization. In 1942 some 200 Protestant leaders gathered to set a new tone and a new course.

The enactment, reenactment and modification of tradition is dependent upon living and acting human beings. Someone must bring traditions to bear upon the present. Endogenous change occurs, Shils observes, when a "personality or mind of originality and imagination perceives a profound gap in the adequacy of the prevailing tradition and seeks to fill that gap, while acknowledging his derivation from it."[61] In a day when intellectuals and other members of the cultural elite turned from the church, and when many within the church moved toward liberalism or fundamentalism, a small band of Church leaders gathered to alter the religious landscape of American Protestantism. Their leadership shaped modern evangelicalism. They believed that the Church was adrift from its roots and they sought to redirect the Church along a different path. Smith notes, "This clique of maverick religious activists were convinced that it was possible not only to believe the historic orthodox faith, but to do so in a way that was intellectually respectable, culturally engaged, and socially responsible."[62]

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[61] Edward Shils, *Tradition* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Ill., 1981), 229.
[62]Smith, *American Evangelicalism,* 11.

From their meeting in St. Louis, Mo., during the spring of 1942, the National Association of Evangelicals was born. Fuller Theological Seminary, Billy Graham's Crusades, the NAE, various publications such as *Christianity Today*, and many other evangelical institutions and organizations would emerge from this movement to call American Protestantism back to a heritage of which many feared the church and the culture had lost sight.

Accommodations

During the late 1920s and early '30s, conservative Protestants were deeply concerned about "liberalizing" tendencies as mainline churches embraced the high culture of philosophical modernism. Many, though not all, within so-called mainline churches surrendered long-held commitments to the authority and inspiration of the Bible and, along with the Bible, certain doctrinal views such as the virgin birth of Christ, the deity of Christ and the bodily resurrection of Christ. Religious conservatives argued that such adaptation amounted to the creation of a whole new religion.[63]

Religious conservatives, on the other hand, maintained their allegiance to the authority of the Bible and the key doctrines of their faith. Though resisting the intellectual assault of later modernity, they had their own unwitting and subtle struggle with modernity. For evangelical traditions, accommodation occurred in the earliest moments of modernity. Theirs was an accommodation that led to more radical adaptations in the areas of forms, methods and style.

Historian Mark Noll has shown that religious conservatives were, and are, very much at home with the logic of early modernity. American evangelicalism, he argues, has always been highly influenced by Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, a system of philosophical thought that took for granted a direct correspondence between the world

[63] See J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1923).

perceived and reality itself.[64] Foundational to this system of thought was the notion that "all humans possessed, by nature, a common set of capacities – both epistemological and ethical – through which they could grasp the basic realities of nature and morality."[65] Evangelicals embraced these enlightenment notions and Baconian scientific ideals as a means of defending their faith.

Noll points out that the most articulate and influential proponents of this Scottish enlightenment thought were the Protestant ministers and educators of the day. The impact of this philosophical adaptation is broad, defining the "mental habits of evangelicals North and South, for dignified urban ministers and enterprising preachers on the frontier, for sober doctrinal conservatives and populist democratic polemicists.[66]

Long-held doctrinal positions continued to be the cornerstone of conservative religion, but even they were increasingly recast in the mold of early modern rationalism and scientific method. For example, religious conservatives began to treat the Bible as a laboratory of facts that, when organized appropriately according to the laws of hermeneutical science, resulted in a clearly defined theological system. Charles Hodge, a Presbyterian and professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote,

> The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his storehouse of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.[67]

Evangelicalism is very much at home with the enlightenment commitment to reason and scientific method. The early emphasis on revival techniques by Charles Finney in the nineteenth century exemplify the scientific and rationalistic shape of

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[64] Mark Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," *American Quarterly*, (Volume 37, Issue 2, Summer, 1985), 216-238. Also see, George Marsden, "Evangelicals, History, and Modernity," in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1984).
[65] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich. 1994), 85.
[66] Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 85.
[67] Charles Hodge as quoted in Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," 223.

conservative religion. Finney believed and taught that revival could be manufactured through the application and use of technique. Contemporary evangelicals continue to place a heavy emphasis on an evidentialist defense of Christianity, asserting that if the facts can be rightly aligned certain theological conclusions will follow – belief comes through logical syllogisms. B. B. Warfield, conservative theologian at Princeton Theological seminary argued,

> It [Christianity] has been placed in the world to reason its way to the dominion of the world. And it is by reasoning its way that it has come to its kingship. By reasoning it will gather to itself all its own. And by reasoning it will put its enemies under its feet.[68]

Popular books, like Josh McDowell's book on the resurrection of Christ, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, are staples in evangelical circles and perpetuate evangelical commitment to the logic of early modernity. In addition, evangelicals have become masters of method and technique for the purposes of promotion, advertising and marketing. In some deep sense, modernity entered the church. The recent divide between religious conservatives and liberals coincides with the shift between early and late modernism that abandoned its commitments to Common Sense Philosophy. Though conservative churches have maintained their commitments to key biblical doctrines, there is mounting evidence that the present emphasis on style threatens to displace "beliefs" as priority, if it has not already done so.

The adaptation to the logic of early modernity is a striking contrast to the earlier theologies of the Protestant Reformation and the revival preaching of Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards. The shift, Craig Gay suggests in his book *The Way of the Modern*, amounts to the subtle but certain neglect, if not rejection, of "Christian orthodoxy – with its emphasis on human inability, sovereign grace, new birth and conversion."[69] Modernity

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[68] B.B. Warfield as quoted in Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," 228.

[69] Craig M. Gay, *The way of the Modern World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live as if God Doesn't Exist* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1998), 255.

has seemingly squeezed the church into its mold, emphasizing growth, newness, technique, methods, ability and style, while the much older doctrine of human depravity and inability has become irrelevant and in many cases offensive. Modernity entered the church.

Evangelicalism is a repository of American Protestanism's response to the cultural forces of modernity. Unlike the response of the fundamentalist movement, with whom evangelicals share a number of core beliefs, evangelicals have been historically committed to getting their hands dirty. Their strategy was one of "engaged orthodoxy." Evangelicals were committed to pressing into the culture, into social problems, into the world that it might be "won" and changed, but always with a commitment to the "first things of the gospel." Yet American evangelicalism, as a movement within the church, is decidedly modern and has been from its beginning. Its adaptation to Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, its reliance on technique, and method are decidedly modern adaptations. Even so, its use of the modern was always to a particular end, or mission – the salvation of the lost.

Such accommodations, however, have weakened evangelicals, not strengthened them. They are the very one's asking clarifying questions about their calling and identity. The boundaries of evangelicalism are simply not clear to anyone.

The Crisis of Culture

Unlike the philosophical commitments characteristic of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, postmodernism is characterized by its loss of faith in ultimate authority. Few deny that the present culture is in the throes of rapid and significant cultural change. By the turn of the century, mainline denominations within the church in America were giving assent to this emerging loss of certainty. And by the late 1920s, seminaries and denominations were splitting over the challenges of late modern epistemological commitments. Christian liberalism was born and, according to prominent conservative

scholars of the day, was so altered from the earlier tradition that it comprised a whole new religion.[70]

On the other hand, the conservative evangelical church did not adopt the logic of later modernity. Its rational formulations of old dogmas continued to hold sway of the hearts and minds of adherents. The logic of late modernity, however, metamorphosed into the emergent culture of postmodernity, a culture adrift, unanchored in any particular port for any length of time. Kenneth Gergen argues that postmodernism is an epistemological revolution – the abandonment of a search for universal truth. Instead of taking beliefs seriously, individuals, according to Gergen, "play" with the culture at hand. Like a child in a candy store, we should take what we need or what seems useful for the moment. While the degree to which people actually begin to approach life as a "candy store" varies, Gergen clearly identifies anti-authoritarian and consumeristic trends characteristic of the postmodern self. The Church is assaulted on both fronts.

The loss of confidence in modernity may open the way to the "reinchantment" of the world.[71] The postmodern world is a pastiche, "a crazy quilt, collage, hodgepodge patchwork of ideas or views. . . . It glories in contradiction and confusion."[72] Religious narratives, like other narratives, become part of the public-domain, free to be used at will. Accordingly, Gergen urges the postmodern to "play with the traditional forms." He writes,

> To pray, to feel remorse, to express gratitude, to conduct business, to make a scientific discovery are all forms of cultural ritual – constructed forms of activity particular to cultures in given times and places. And one may indulge in such activities fully, following their rules and thus relating to those making up such cultures. . . . and at the same time, one should at all times be able to step back and see each of these rituals from the

[70] See Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*.
[71] See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (Routledge: New York, N.Y., 1992).
[72] Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1992), xiii.

> perspective of "other worlds." They are modes of life among many others.[73]

Dobblaere and Voye's study of religion in Belgium finds such postmodern adaptations.[74] They describe the postmodern assemblage as "Religion 'a la carte'" – tailored to individual needs and experiences.[75] They note, "In Belgium, the need for concrete reassurances related to the facts of everyday life, expresses itself in a recourse to forms of popular religion and religious 'bricolage.'"[76] They find within the Belgic church "a reaction against a church that, adapting to modernity, insisted on the intellectual dimensions of faith and eliminated the festive and magical elements of its rites and practices."[77] In place of intellect, attendants seek emotion, music, candles, flowers – magic and playfulness tailored to meet particular needs. Their analysis echoes Gergen's pastiche personality. Gergen writes,

> The pastiche personality is a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation. . . . Life becomes a candy store for one's developing appetites.[78]

The postmodern world may be open to religion in a way that the modern was not, but the terms of have changed with the times. Religion remains both private and rationalized. It is a product for private consumption and the guiding logic for consumption is nothing less than the logic of the market place – its utility. Religious institutions face the pressures to become something different, a vender of religious goods and services for religious consumers to select those elements suitable to the present need or, better yet, desire.

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[73] Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity In Contemporary Life*, (Basic Books: New York, N.Y., 1991), 197.
[74] Karel Dobbelaere and Lilian Voye, "From Pillar to Postmodernity: the changing situation of religion in Belgium," *Sociological Analysis* (Volume 51, no.5, 1-13).
[75] Dobbelaere and Voye, "From Pillar to Postmodernity," 11.
[76] Dobbelaere and Voye, "From Pillar to Postmodernity,"11.
[77] Dobbelaere and Voye, "From Pillar to Postmodernity," 9.
[78] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 150.

Responding to the Crisis

Cultural crisis and confusion opens a gap between understanding and experience that begs resolution. In such situations, organizations identify and clarify their purpose, values, commitments, goals, and vision in an attempt to anchor themselves in the face of the multifaceted assault of cultural shifts. Institutions tend toward stasis, but periods of crisis often lead to the creation of new forms, new ways of seeing and doing that, if successful, become the new status quo. Religious institutions are no exception. Each movement of evangelicalism is connected with changes within the church, the culture or both. The evangelical tradition within the church is at all times a contextualized tradition that interfaces with the culture at hand.

Take for example, the Protestant Reformation, Puritanism, the First and Second Great Awakenings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; these social movements are rooted in particular social contexts and happenings. These expressions of the Christian tradition are responses to the cultural context at hand and, thus, they are shaped by those contexts as well. As one pattern or model wanes, and as the broader culture changes, new models, new ways of seeing and doing emerge and eventually became the normative paradigm or model.

Many argue that the church has, once again, entered such an historical moment – a moment in which the broader culture has changed rapidly and dramatically, and in which the church has failed to translate its message into the cultural vernacular of the moment. This failure has rendered evangelicalism ineffective in reaching and "winning" individuals and the broader culture itself to the gospel tradition. In the midst of the confusion, evangelicalism is being reinvented for the present moment. Just as the Protestant Reformation, the First and Second Awakenings, and, in a lesser sense, the founding of the NAE are moments of religious innovation that sought to recapture something perceived lost, so evangelicals are presently caught in a new moment of

religious innovation, in their quest to *win* the *lost*. Yet, there is no consensus as to how evangelicalism ought proceed. Evangelicalism is contested terrain.

New Paradigm Churches

Donald Miller, in his book *Reinventing American Protestantism*, argues that "a new style of Christianity is being born in the United States, one that responds to fundamental cultural changes that began in the mid-1960s. These new paradigm churches . . . are changing the way Christianity looks and is experienced."[79] Miller suggests that this movement within the church is a second reformation. But unlike the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, which was a reformation principally around doctrine and beliefs, this is a reformation of the "medium through which the message of Christianity is articulated."[80] New paradigm churches articulate a response to the therapeutic, individualistic and anti-establishment themes of modern and postmodern culture. Miller's study of Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Fellowship and Hope Chapel, each a new paradigm church, tells a story of this new reformation, what he refers to as a Third Great Awakening.

It is doubtful that new paradigm churches actually constitute a third awakening. There are, however, a number of parallels between new paradigm churches and the Second Great Awakening. New paradigm churches reject the establishment religion of mainline denominations. They do not place a premium on church buildings, and traditional religious symbols are of minor or no importance. These churches often meet in school auditoriums and storefronts across the country, and when they do have a building, the worship space is sparsely decorated. Folding chairs have replaced pews, and overhead projectors shining lyrics on walls replace hymnbooks, and casual, relaxed dress replaces yesterday's "Sunday best." Worship consists of lengthy periods of singing "praise songs" – as opposed to more traditional hymns. Worship is experiential and

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[79] Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (University of California Press: Berkeley, Calif., 1997), 1.
[80] Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 11.

expressive – participants stand and sit and may lift their hands as an expression of their personal faith and worship. Miller sees this expression of Christianity as reaching back into its primal roots of the first century, where people were most concerned with their "daily encounter with Jesus."[81]

> Why new paradigm churches and why now? Miller offers an explanation: Religion becomes routinized over time. . . . Priestly roles are identified, sacred texts are canonized, rules and procedures for mediating access to the sacred evolve, and in this process the people become more and more distanced from the transforming source of the sacred. Taken to an extreme, religious institutions become encrusted bureaucracies that survive with low levels of commitment, primarily through habit and because they are integrated with other aspects of institutional life. It is from this religious context that reformist movements emerge.[82]

Addressing the reason for the success of new paradigm churches, Miller adds,

> New paradigm churches appropriate elements of contemporary culture without accommodating all of its values. This is a powerful combination and the opposite of what establishment religion often does, accommodating cultural values yet lagging behind the culture in its musical and organizational innovation. [83]

He delineates four cultural needs with which new paradigm churches have connected. First, new paradigm churches have sought to build community for members – members whose lives, like many others within American culture, are deeply affected by the loss of community due to the strains on family life brought on by divorce and the high mobility of our society. These churches are a place of warmth and embrace. Second, these churches have become a haven for families who have grown weary and fearful of raising their children in the conditions of the present cultural moment. Third, the therapeutic needs of individuals and families are met. Fourth, new paradigm churches offer hope through extending both personal healing and securing the person within a common destiny that shapes their lives together.[84]

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[81] Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 180.
[82] Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 181.
[83] Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 184.
[84] Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 184-185.

Seeker Churches

Within the arch of response to the changing culture, "seeker churches" are one of the more influential stylistic adaptations to postmodern culture. And within the seeker church movement, Willow Creek Community Church stands at the forefront of the battle to reinvent American evangelicalism. Willow Creek Community Church is located outside of Chicago, in Schaumberg, Illinois. It began as a church dedicated to reaching the "unchurched" with the gospel, and today, some 15,000 attend one of its three services each week.

They assemble in the church's 4,500-seat auditorium, which is outfitted with theater-style seating, stage, curtain and a variety of high-tech equipment. What makes this service a seeker service is its style. Willow Creek consciously departs from traditional forms of worship in an effort to bring in the unchurched. To that end, the church makes few demands on participants. Soft background music plays as attendants take their seats. The service includes a variety of contemporary music, generally performed by a vocalist or small group from the front of the auditorium.

The messages are often illustrated through an opening drama, and the messages themselves are cast in terms of the "felt needs" of participants. Topics include titles such as "Enriching Your Relationships," "Fanning the Flames of Marriage," "Energy Management," and "Maintaining a Healthy Attitude."[85] Seeker churches encourage attendants to "browse" and inquire into the teachings of the church anonymously at their own pace, in the hope that some will believe.

Willow Creek's success is not limited to the 15,000 who gather each weekend for services. Rather, Willow Creek has quickly become a paradigm itself for the new evangelicalism. Churches across the nation have adapted similar styles of reaching out to the unchurched of their own communities. Willow Creek and similar seeker-service

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[85] Sermon titles and descriptions are taken from Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Faith and Fulfillment: Willow Creek and the Future of Evangelicalism,* (Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Virginia, 1996), 7 – 10.

churches are deliberately altering the way in which evangelicals "do" church. Theirs is a revolution of style. Seeker churches, like other evangelical churches, retain their commitment to the core beliefs characteristic of evangelicals, yet they are most famous for their pioneering work in methods and techniques for communicating with and reaching religious seekers.

"How are churches to reach these seekers?" Church-growth strategist George Barna makes wide use of marketing research in his consultations with interested churches. Barna has published a number of books, including *Frog in the Kettle, Marketing the Church, User Friendly Churches.* The contemporary church is in decline, Barna argues in his latest book, *The Second Coming of the Church,* "because a growing majority of people have dismissed the Christian faith as weak, outdated, and irrelevant."[86] Barna broadly outlines the changing demographic profile of American culture, including the impact of postmodern culture on society, before outlining a plan for the "second coming" of the church, the first coming of which, he says, was Pentecost. The plan includes among other things the creation of,

> faith experience so oriented to satisfying people's felt needs at a high level of quality that the Church will successfully *compete* with the best that the world has to offer. Thus, if Americans are turning to people or places other than the Church, we must determine why, and then respond with a superior, faith-saturated alternative. Our alternatives will not appeal to people, though, unless we understand people and the competition for their time, attention, resources, and loyalty.[87]

Kimon Sargeant argues that Barna, along with various mega-churches and seeker churches, holds,

> a commitment to Christian renewal through the local church (often a megachurch) rather than through politics, the culture, the denomination, or even parachurch organizations; a commitment to evangelism as the

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[86] George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church: A Blueprint for Survival* (Word Publishing: Nashville, Tenn., 1998), 5.
[87] Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, 96-97.

> primary mission of the church; and finally a commitment to "using the tools of the behavioral sciences to aid effective evangelism."[88]

The influence of Willow Creek is growing. The church claims that some 10,000 other churches hold seeker services. In 1992 Willow Creek founded The Willow Creek Association to assist those churches interested in broadening their appeal through seeker services. The association conducts seminars, offers consulting services and provides a variety of other educational resources to affiliate churches.

Sargeant characterizes the seeker-church movement, specifically the Willow Creek Association, as a Postmodern denomination that, unlike traditional denominational structures, is founded around issues of style and method rather than doctrinal convictions, and which lacks religious authority over its members.[89] The only requirement for membership in the association is that affiliate churches pay their dues. In the end, Sargeant claims, tradition is lost in the translation. He finds that seeker churches over-contexualize and lose the evangelical tradition to the broader culture. Sargeant argues that the user-friendly approach of the seeker church fails to "contrast the church with the 'evil' ways of the world but instead shows seekers how much Christianity is like the world."[90]

Further, it is not clear that seeker churches have actually reached many within the secular strongholds of American culture. Seeker churches are underrepresented in the highly secular areas of the country such as New England, Mid-Atlantic States and the Pacific. Further, one in four evangelical churches are in metropolitan areas, and one in three seeker churches are in metropolitan areas.[91] All of this suggests that the strategy, while popular, may do little more than grow large churches in areas traditionally strong

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[88] Os Guiness, "Sounding Out the Idols of the Church Growth Movement," Quoted in Sargeant, *Faith and Fulfillment*, 21.
[89] Sargeant, *Faith and Fulfillment*, 258.
[90] Sargeant, *Faith and Fulfillment*, 306.
[91] Sargeant, *Faith and Fulfillment*, 128-129.

for evangelicals and do very little in the way of winning highly secularized people to the gospel.

The Shopping Mall as Metaphor

On the surface, seeker churches prosper. Large numbers of people are streaming in. Services appear to be successful, stemming from - as proponents argue - a willingness to adapt. Specifically, success is rooted in the willingness to compete for the souls of men and women in the religious marketplace. Hunter argues that the seeker movement is a new style of religion that alters the locus of religious authority. He writes,

> The shopping mall becomes the paradigm of organizational effort. Marketing research is used to determine what insiders call the "felt needs" of the consumers. Rather than preaching what the traditions always held to be objectively true, ministry has now become oriented toward satisfying the psychological and emotional needs of those in the pew.[92]

Religion is increasingly reduced to personal taste, and the church begins to cater to the taste of its customers. Hunter continues,

> The very content of what is preached is determined less by the historical traditions of the church as by the felt needs of the parishioner. In this, the organizational seat of authority is no longer the church, its traditions, its sacred texts or its leadership but the parishioner him or herself. The consumer, even of truth, has become sovereign.[93]

Historically, the locus of religious authority was outside of the self. But increasingly, in a consumer-focused culture, the locus of authority is constituted within the self. When truth lay outside of the individual, it defined the contours of religious life and behavior. In the postmodern religious economy the tables are turned, and the religious consumer defines the contours of religious life and behavior. Thus, while religious categories persist and institutions may "thrive," they also take on the shape of the postmodern *zeitgeist*, becoming little more than venders of religious goods and services. Sociologists have long argued that religious authority is relegated to the private

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[92] James Hunter, "The Changing Locus of Religions," *The Partisan Review* (Vol. 64, no. 2, 1997), 193.
[93] Hunter, "The Changing Locus of Religions," 193.

sphere. The troubling reality of the postmodern era, Hunter argues, is that even within the private sphere, religious authority is fragmented and subjectivized.[94] Hunter writes,

> A key difference between religion at the end of the nineteenth century and religion today is not so much its prevalence but in the nature and scope of its binding address. Over the past century, religious authority has not only been relegated to smaller and smaller areas of human experience, but even there its power to compel has been tamed and domesticated.[95]

Seminaries offer classes and workshops that train pastors and laypeople in the ways of the world, instructing them in telemarketing strategies, the use of personality and learning-style profiles, how to build a purpose-driven church, and other methodological and technical training. One pastor of a large church in a large Southern city has become so proficient in his use of marketing strategies that he is invited to train CEOs about vision and strategy. His church has a membership of more than 3,000 and boasts that its mission is to attempt something so great for God that it would be doomed to failure if God were not in it. The risk, however, is that success becomes more an issue of technical wizardry than the advent and activity of the transcendent God.

Critics of the seeker movement argue that these new paradigm churches have created a domesticated evangelicalism that is powerless to preserve orthodoxy as it engages the culture at hand. Instead, "new paradigm" churches, like those within the Willow Creek Network, seem to have simply bought into the logic of the consumer culture – adopting it as normative, as the new way to do church. The shopping mall, as metaphor, is broadly characteristic of many institutions and their interaction with the purchasing public in our day. The metaphor is not uniquely attributed to the church. The unsettling reality is that the church is, apparently, no exception – it is a lot like the world it seeks to save.

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[94] James Hunter, "The Changing Locus of Religions," 194.
[95] Hunter, "The Changing Locus of Religions," 194.

Settling the Contested Terrain

Thomas Khun's important work in the sociology of science, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, argues that science moves forward dramatically by leaps and jumps – through paradigm shifts.[96] Nothing as dramatic as previous scientific revolutions is underway within American evangelicalism, but the metaphor of "paradigm shift" is useful in understanding the kinds of changes and debate currently surfacing within the church. The present confusion over meaning, over the usefulness of the evangelical label and the emergence of new approaches to church is a window into the cultural confusion within evangelicalism. The evangelical church is characterized by uncertainty as to how it ought to "be the church" in the present cultural context.

DiMaggio and Powell's concept of institutional isomorphism is useful in understanding the way in which evangelicals seek to overcome their uncertainty. DiMaggio and Powell argue that institutions within a given organizational field seek resolution through clarifying boundaries, expectations and procedures – they seek homogeneity.[97] That homogeneity, they argue, is achieved through isomorphism, "a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions."[98] For example, institutions mimic those institutions within its organizational field that are perceived as successful.[99] In the absence, however, of successful organizational models within their own field, DiMaggio and Powell argue that institutions will seek models outside of their field. All institutions within a given field tend toward homogeneity.

Evangelicalism is a contested organizational field. The rules of doing church are not as clear as they once were, and accordingly, church leaders seek new ways of being

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[96] Thomas S. Khun, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Ill., 1970).
[97] Paul DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, ed. Walter Powell and Paul DiMaggio (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1991), 64.
[98] DiMaggio and Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited," 66.

the church – many times looking beyond their own field, to those institutions within the broader culture that are marked by success. Ours is an unsettled and contested period. Ann Swidler observes, that in such times,

> cultural meanings are more highly articulated and explicit, because they model patterns of action that do not "come naturally." Belief and ritual practice directly shape action for the community that adheres to a given ideology. Such ideologies are, however, in competition with other sets of cultural assumptions. Ultimately, structural and historical opportunities determine which strategies, and thus which cultural systems, succeed.[100]

Modern evangelicalism was born in the midst of confusion and disagreement with the direction of the Church of its day. The early "mavericks" of evangelicalism did a great deal of ideologizing setting in motion a new movement of the church. Our day is witness to the emergence of such mavericks and such ideologies as evangelicals attempt to sort out the uncertainties of its moral order and articulate new ways of "doing" church.

Redeemer Presbyterian Church, the subject of this study, is an emerging model. Like new paradigm and seeker churches, Redeemer leaders attempt to understand and change the way church is done within its cultural context. Redeemer is an evangelical church – in that its leadership holds those doctrinal beliefs common to other evangelicals – and Redeemer is a successful church to most onlookers having grown to 3000 in weekly attendance in a city context many would have doubted possible. Yet, Redeemer has not looked to the habits and practices of evangelicalism in order to clarify its ministry. Rather, Redeemer's message and practices are anchored in the past – the traditions and habits of a previous generation.

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[99] DiMaggio and Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited," 75.
[100] Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action, Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* (Vol. 51, April 1986, pp. 273-86), 284.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GOSPEL IN NEW YORK CITY

"For every explorer who searches for the answer to tomorrow, New York is the laboratory."[101]
–Herbert London

Manhattan is home to 1.7 million people of diverse ethnic and religious background. Despite its reputation of secularity New York City is actually quite religious. Sociologist Tony Carnes writes that New York City is home to "more Roman Catholics, Moslems, Hindus, Rastafarians, Jehovahs Witnesses, Greek Orthodox, Rusian Orthodox, and religious Jews than in any other city in the U.S."[102] The persistence and adaptation of religion is closely tied with immigration. Carnes, notes that "over one-half of Asian immigrants are church goers; 70 percent of all immigrants to NY are Christians (ICMEC 1999); and the fastest growing institution in Hispanic neighborhoods is the church."[103]

Moreover, some 46 percent of those living in New York City claim to attend church at least once a month.[104] Carnes estimates that only 18 percent of New Yorkers are evangelical Protestant, and the single largest denominational affiliation (27 percent) is charasmatic. Still, Manhattan is noticeably the more secular of the five boroughs that comprise New York City with only 26 percent of those residing in Manhattan regularly attending religious services in contrast to 37 – 43 percent in the other boroughs.[105]

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is a new comer to the Manhattan religious economy. It is 11 years old. Since its beginning in 1989 the church has grown from a small Bible study of 15 or so people into a congregation with an average attendance over

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[101] Herbert London, *The Broken Apple: New York City in the 1980s* (Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick, N.J., 1989), 4.
[102] Tony Carnes, *New York Glory: Religions in the City* (In Press: NYU Press 2000).
[103] Carnes, *New York Glory.*
[104] New York Times/ CBS TV-2 Survey May 10-14, 1994 in Carnes, *New York Glory*.
[105] 1995 New Yorker Poll in Carnes, *New York Glory*.

3,000. One pastor said of its rapid growth, "people are following in droves." And its growth is not limited to its own congregation; Redeemer has initiated a number of church plants, establishing congregations in Westchester county, Long Island, Greenwich Village, Harlam and the Upper West Side, and its has assisted in a number of ethnic church plants as well. Redeemer led the way in forming a regional Metropolitan New York Presbytery consisting of affiliated PCA churches in the metropolitan area. In 1999 Redeemer adopted a multi-site strategy that decentralizes the present congregation by holding worship services East and West Side neighborhoods of Manhattan.

Redeemer was not the first church of its denomination to locate in the city. The Presbyterian Church in America, experimented with an earlier church, Manhattan Presbyterian Church, but it suffered a number of set-backs and shortly after Redeemer opened its doors, it closed its doors, many of its members assimilating into Redeemer while others found their way into other evangelical churches in the city.

In this chapter I will trace the origins of Redeemer to the various people and social realities that contributed to Redeemer's entrance on the Manhattan religious landscape. Of particular importance and prominence is the role of Tim Keller, the founding pastor of Redeemer. In order to understand Redeemer one must invariably consider Keller's role in establishing the church.

Leadership

Cultural change does not just happen. Traditions are not recovered out of the blue. Rather, as Edward Shils describes, "living, knowing, desiring human beings can enact them and reenact them and modify them."[106] The development of modern evangelicalism includes the activity of its leaders, "mavericks," Smith called them, who envisioned a gap and led the church along a path of change and recovery of engaged orthodoxy. Leadership, in the sense identified here, is not the property of personality –

[106] Shils, *Tradition*, 14-15.

it is not charisma. Rather, leadership consists of vision, assessment or identification of need and mobilization of resources to overcome the gap between need and vision.

Envisioning the gaps or imagination is an important aspect of cultural change within traditions. Some person or persons must assess the situation or context – the moral order – evaluating it against the backdrop of another order – other norms. Edward Shils conceives of this trait as imagination without which he observes, "no significant modifications in the traditions which provide patterns of belief and which control the circumstances of action could be made."[107] Sociologists, however, according to historian George Marsden, typically offer "little place . . . for human initiative" in accounts of social change.[108] Marsden finds that sociological reflection on religion, for example, is nearly void of particular reference to individuals except as illustrations. Sociologists generally downplay the role of religious groups and their leaders in "shaping their destinies."[109] Admittedly, leadership is a difficult concept, because it draws attention away from social and cultural forces to the particular role of individuals within those forces; it doesn't immediately seem sociological; rather, analysis of leadership seems to fit best with psychological analysis or perhaps studies in business and management. Yet, leadership is a sociological concept central to analysis of change. This is especially true in analysis of religious groups that historically rely on the leadership of "their" pastor. Social and cultural forces do not simply collide and evolve – they are carried along by "knowing, living and enacting" human beings. Yet, human beings operate within particular contexts comprised of particular resources – personal and cultural. The leaders may reject one order in favor of another one, but resources must be mobilized and assembled if change is to occur.

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[107] Shils, *Tradition*, 228.
[108] George Marsden, "The Great Divide," Reviews in American History (Vol. 17, Issue 2, 284-288), 286.
[109] Marsden, "The Great Divide," 287.

Tim Keller, Redeemer's senior minister, is the "maverick" behind Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Keller, of course, is not the only person or resource involved in starting and developing Redeemer Presbyterian Church. As Howard Becker observes in regard to the creation of art worlds, "all artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people."[110] Cooperation between social agents and the array of social resources available to them gives the work its peculiar shape. Imaginative leadership, Robert Nisbet observes, is a "vortex, into which the materials of the environing culture are swept, assimilated and expressed."[111] To single out Keller's contribution is not to diminish the work, role or contribution of other leaders or resources, but it is to acknowledge that Keller's expertise, gifts and abilities give Redeemer a certain shape that it would not have in his absence. As Becker notes, in the absence of some figures, activities or resources, works of art are still produced, but the work produced is different.[112]

In the case of institutional and cultural change, diagnosis and prescription go hand-in-hand, and at Redeemer, it is Keller's imaginative assessment of the gap, of the failures of the modern church, of the inadequacies of evangelicalism, of the tension between Church and culture and of the gospel tradition itself that shapes the particular way in which Redeemer understands and resolves the tension between orthodoxy and the pressures of secularization. Keller has a prophetic quality in that he led the way in defining the mission of Redeemer in New York City and as Redeemer succeeds, he increasingly defines the broader mission of other churches within Redeemer's institutional field. "One does not have to hold to a great person theory," Marsden stated, "to believe that historical development is illuminated by considering the actions and intentions of particular human agents, even if they act within massive constraints of

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[110] Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1982), 1.
[111] Robert A. Nisbet, "Leadership and Social Crisis," in Studies in Leadership: Leadership and Democratic Action (Russell and Russell: New York, N.Y., 1965: 707-720), 710.
[112] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 5.

social forces."[113] Keller is not a charismatic leader; yet, he plays crucial role in breaking with the religious norms of his day. He has, as Edward Shils observes, sought

> to break the structures of routine actions and to replace them with structures of inspired actions which are "infused" with those qualities or states of mind generated by immediate and intensive contact with the "ultimate" – with the powers which guide and determine human life.[114]

Keller's role is not unusual; but it is defining of the church. Certain institutional and cultural conditions require such leadership in order to break through the inertia. Keller has been that figure for Redeemer. Accordingly, as Keller resolves the dilemma of secularization for himself he solves it for his congregation as well as well as for other evangelical churches.

Paul DiMaggio's explanation of the emerging distinction between high and pop culture in nineteenth century Boston notes the role of individual leadership in cultural change. Prior to 1900 the Boston arts community lacked boundaries – higher forms of art were frequently displayed alongside of popular forms. By 1910, however, the situation had changed. High and popular cultural art forms were not likely to appear within the same setting.[115] Distinctions previously non-existent emerged and pop-cultural forms were separated. DiMaggio attributes the emerging "sacralization of art" to "the work of men and women," who worked as cultural entrepreneurs initiating and institutionalizing change.[116] They created organizational forms, established boundary lines and framed the relationships that would exist between works of art and their audiences.[117] Marginality positioned entrepreneurs to attempt changes within classification, and within the art world itself that were previously non-existent. DiMaggio's entrepreneur is like Becker's

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[113] George Marsden, "The Great Divide," 286.
[114] Edward Shils, Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Ill., 1975), 129.
[115] Paul Dimaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," in *Rethinking Popular Culture*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Micheal Schudson (University of California Press: Berkeley, Ca., 1991), 375.
[116] Dimaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-century Boston," 376.
[117] Dimaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-century Boston," 377.

"maverick" who, unlike the "integrated professional," are free from the "conventions" of the art world."[118] They are positioned to "propose innovations the art world refuses to accept as within limits of what it ordinarily produces."[119] Yet, successful or lasting entrepreneurship cannot be the work of "rugged individualists." The work of the maverick, if it is to last, must be incorporated into the conventions of the art world. Apart from adequate "organizational support systems" mavericks will fail to attract audiences and students – they will fail to affect the conventions within the art world.[120] In the case of distinctions within high and popular art forms, DiMaggio observes that on the one hand detachments enabled entrepreneurs to attempt change, but their central ties to Boston's social elite led to long-term adoption of new conventions of classification.[121] Artists may create art, or in the case of religion, leaders may resolve the dilemma of secularization, but they must also "mobilize enough people to cooperate in regular ways" in order to sustain and further solutions.[122]

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is the work of men and woman. Redeemer did not just appear within the religious economy of New York City. Redeemer is the work of cultural entrepreneurs who dreamed and worked hard to start a new church in the city. They too, had to create, classify and frame. Tim Keller has been at the center of that activity since the church's beginning. He is like the entrepreneurs within Boston's art culture of the nineteenth century and like the evangelical mavericks who sought to renew evangelicalism in the 1940s. And though many people joined in the activity of starting Redeemer, from the beginning, Keller led the way. One elder said of him, "Tim had the vision and we followed."

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[118] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 233.
[119] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 233.
[120] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 300.
[121] DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-century Boston," 390.
[122] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 301.

A failure to understand the role of the original leaders, and especially of Keller, is a failure to understand Redeemer itself. In the end, however, Keller's leadership and that of the broader group collectively is not sufficient to produce lasting change within an organization or tradition. Many men and women have ideas about the way things ought to be, but unless visions and ideas are institutionalized, built into the warp and woof of the community itself, their visions die with them. Apart from such institutionalization, the ideas and vision of Redeemer will die as well. In the sections that follow we will consider the people – specifically the leaders – that cooperated in order to create Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

A History of Redeemer

In the mid 1980s leadership from a conservative Baptist church in Manhattan contacted Joe Novenson, a pastor in Lexington, S.C., about the possibilities of him becoming their pastor. He was not interested in leaving his present church or denomination – he declined. Sometime later he mentioned the interest to Terry Gyger, who was serving as director of the PCA's Mission to North America, and suggested that there may be some interest in planting a PCA church in Manhattan.

The time for such a move seemed ripe. Conversations with the Baptist group indicated an emerging interest in evangelical perspectives in the city. Terry Gyger decided to pull together a group of people to explore the possibilities. The group was composed of denominational educators, church planters and pastors who were intrigued with the notion of planting an evangelical and reformed church in New York City.

In the late '80s the religious landscape of the city was decidedly non-evangelical – at least from the perspective of the interviewees with whom I spoke concerning Redeemer's beginnings. Church pulpits, according to a para-church minister in the city, "had been stripped" of an evangelical presence. Theological liberalism was commonplace. One pastor of a prominent Presbyterian Church openly mocked fundamentalists and evangelicals from the pulpit with some regularity. One of the

founding members of Redeemer said of the church situation, "There was no church in which the gospel was being preached. 'Historic' Christianity was absent from the Upper East Side. Nor were any of the established churches interested in taking in new converts."

There were or had been churches that were more or less evangelical or, as one interviewee said, "in which the Bible was taught," but in 1988 and 1989 many of these churches were without pastors. The decline of the number of evangelical churches and the vacancy of pulpits is rooted in much more than overt accommodation and capitulation to theological liberalism. Rather, evangelicals have long been skeptical about the prospects and possibility of living the godly life within the boundaries of the city, and by the turn of the century had largely abandoned the city. Of course, evangelicals didn't completely abandon the city, but large cities have historically been viewed as difficult and dangerous places.

Those evangelicals who remained in the city were likely to be found within para-church organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ or Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. These missions-minded groups deliberately entered the city to be a witness for the gospel. Many of these para-church leaders were hungry for vibrant evangelical churches in the city, and apart from any denominational encouragement, they had begun to meet and to dream about the possibilities of a new church – of a revival.

Dave and Diane Balch, were one of those para-church couples. They moved to New York from Philadelphia in 1984 to pioneer Campus Crusade for Christ's Executive Ministries, a ministry focusing on Manhattan's professional community. When the Balches arrived in New York, they were disappointed in the lack of available churches into which they might funnel individuals from their ministry. This became particularly troubling as their ministry grew into the hundreds. "For a number of years," Dave said, "the church situation was very discouraging to us. The Baptist Church we attended was doing well, but then the pastor left."

The Balch's frustration was not limited to vacant pulpits. Churches were not ready to handle new growth. In particular, the Baptist church the Balches were attending openly expressed disinterest in adding an additional service. Spill-over crowds were already ushered into overflow rooms equipped with video monitors, but they had no plans to add another service. This troubled the Balches, who had moved to the city with the express purpose of beginning a new ministry. To their minds that meant "conversions." Vacant pulpits and disinterest in growth within the evangelical community were problematic, but there were other issues.

According to the Balches there were a number of churches that taught the Bible. These churches, however, generally posed a different problem for the Manhattan professional. For example, when the Balches would invite people to their Baptist church, professionals felt uncomfortable with the cultural style of the church. Diane recalled one woman's comments following such a visit, "She just said, 'I know these people love Jesus, and that they are teaching the Bible, but I just don't belong here; I don't fit.'"

The Balches' comments, like those of others I spoke with, point to an awareness of two primary types of city churches. First, the mainline Protestant churches. These churches, for the most part, were not evangelical or conservative in their theological commitments; in their opinion, these churches were not preaching or teaching the Bible in a manner consistent with or historic Christianity. Second, the evangelical churches that did preach what they considered the historic gospel suffered from vacant pulpits, disinterest in growth and cultural distance from the typical professional – they were an evangelical cultural enclave that had little in common with the culture of the city.

Empty pulpits and limited potential for adding new attendants and members are straightforward problems. However, the interest in "historic Christianity" and the cultural "fit" of the churches with Manhattan's professional culture requires clarification. The telling and retelling of the Redeemer's story and distinctives addresses both

Redeemer's understanding of historic Christianity (an issue explored more closely in chapter five) and the question of cultural fit – cultural style and relevance.

By 1988 the Balches, along with other Campus Crusade staff members in the city, had begun to pray that God would fill vacant pulpits with evangelical pastors and that a new church would be started. Gatherings for prayer and talk were informal, at breakfast or over coffee, as leaders began thinking about the possibilities. These meetings gave voice to the dreams of what "ought" to or what needed to happen. Before Christmas 1987, Dave Balch received a phone call from David Nicholas, pastor of Spanish River Presbyterian Church in Boca Raton, Florida. "David said that he and his wife were coming to New York," Dave recalls, "and wanted to meet with us to talk about our ministry." Not knowing all that the Nicholases wanted to discuss, Dave almost cancelled the get-together. A few days later, however, when the couples met in the Balches living room, Dave and Diane were delighted to hear the Nicholases mention the possibility of planting a church in the city. Diane said,

> I don't think David had mentioned anything about planting a church – just that he was a pastor from the south and that he had heard about our ministry. I think we went into that meeting pretty blind – thinking we were just being polite to two traveling Christians from the South. When he started talking about planting a church, it did not take us but just a minute to realize that God brought these two to talk to us.

Both Dave and Diane were cautiously excited to hear of their interests, but they were not familiar with the denomination and thought it wise to check out its theology before committing to any involvement. "We proceeded with caution," Diane said. "Dave wanted to see if he could agree with their theology so he could get behind it."

The Presbyterian Church in America

The Presbyterian Church in American (PCA) was founded in the 1970s in the midst of discussions of reunification between the northern and southern Presbyterian churches, which had split at the outset of the Civil War. The more conservative southern churches were skeptical about a reunion with the more liberal churches of the North.

The liberalism of the northern church, along with the increasingly liberal tendencies among their own churches led a number of southern pastors to form a new denomination. Negatively speaking, the PCA is a split or fissure within American Presbyterianism, but more positively, PCA leaders sought recovery and renewal of the historic Christian faith as it was recovered and expressed by John Calvin in Geneva, Knox in Scotland, the Westminster Divines in Cromwell's England, and more recently by the Puritans in the United States. The PCA is an institutionalized expression of orthodox Christianity; the PCA takes its creeds seriously. Presbyterians have traditionally subscribed to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as a summary of the central teachings of the Bible. The PCA is evangelical in so far as it shares the doctrinal commitments of evangelicalism. Historically, Presbyterians have been committed to the theology of the reformation with its emphasis on the grace and sovereignty of God, along with cognate doctrines of human inability and depravity. Such doctrines have been less popular within broader evangelicalism. Nathan Hatch in, *The Democratization of American* has shown that more populist or democratic forms of Christianity dominate the current religious context.[123]

Committing to the PCA

Dave Balch had little knowledge of the PCA; he was, however more "reformed" than he realized. Dave had been reading reformed theology for some time, primarily out of his interest in history, and was more or less reformed without realizing it. "I had gotten into reading the Puritans because of my love for history," Dave said. "I did not know anyone else was reading them." Dave was surprised to find that the PCA had similar interests and theological convictions. The whole thing, according to Dave, "was starting to fit like hand-in-glove."

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[123] See Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (Yale University Press: New Haven, Conn., 1989).

During the Balches' meeting with the Nicholases, David Nicholas explained that there was a denominational committee interested in discussing the possibilities of a church plant in Manhattan. The Balches began to see this as something they could commit to and planned a larger meeting early in the upcoming year. At this meeting four couples met with members of the committee to discuss the possible church plant. "We all agreed this was an exciting idea," Dave enthusiastically reported, "and we were looking to them [the committee] for direction. They were the pros. We wanted to be part of whatever was started."

The next step was to find someone to plant this church. The Balches and their planning group decided to try out potential preachers on a Bible study already meeting in the Balches' home, to see what would "fly" with a New York audience. After three pastors considered the idea – several coming to New York to preach – six months later, the potential church was still without a pastor. "Then, the committee all came back into town again," Dave said. "We walked to a restaurant on Third Avenue, and over lunch someone looked over at Tim Keller, who had been teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary since 1984, and asked, 'Tim, what about you – have you ever preached?'

Tim had preached. He was an ordained PCA minister.[124] After graduating from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in 1975, Tim pastored West Hopewell Presbyterian Church in Hopewell Virginia for nine years before going to Westminster to teach. Hopewell is a rural mill town – culturally distinct from New York City. During his time in Hopewell, Keller had completed a Doctor of Ministries degree from Westminster and had gained the respect of the faculty. In 1984 he was asked to come and teach practical theology for the seminary. He taught future pastors how to preach and pastor

[124] Tim Keller is theologically orthodox. Prior to his ordination within the PCA he was examined in his understanding of the theology of the church and later took vows to uphold and teach that same theology. Apart from examination and vow taking he would never have been ordained and if his views or understanding substantively were to deviate from the creeds of the church his ordination would be revoked.

congregations – how to understand the church. He also visited with other churches consulting on issues of vision, ministry and contextualization. He was a logical person to assist the church planting committee in their work.

Brainstorming

Keller had joined New York's church planting group to help them identify a pastor and determine the make up and contextualization of the church. He had not seriously thought of himself as a candidate. He and his family were happy in their suburban Philadelphia life and work. But as he and his wife, Kathy, discussed this new idea, they began to believe that God was calling them to plant this church. They agreed to come, and in February of 1989, Tim began making weekly trips to New York to meet with interested people and ask them about New Yorkers, about the culture, about their expectations for the church. The purpose of the meeting was to learn about New York, but also to mobilize people in cooperation.[125] Most of these meetings took the form of a Bible study and prayer time on Sunday afternoons, but informal gatherings spilled out into the city as smaller groups continued to converse about a church for the city.

I accompanied Tim to the city on one of those early trips. We met in an Upper East Side home where Tim led the gathered group in exploring questions about the culture of the city. Later, several of us attended an Episcopal service on the West Side targeted to the area's homeless population. There was a great deal of energy and excitement among group participants as they discussed what the cultural shape of the church should be and anticipated their first service later that spring. One participant described the meetings as,

> brainstorming sessions for the purpose of defining the target audience. Keller would ask questions like, "What are New Yorker's like? What kind of music do they like? Do they like formal worship or free-style? What is the religious background of the target audience? Where are these people from? Are they native New Yorkers? How can we reach Jews? Homosexuals? Artists?"

[125] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 301.

Generally, Tim would prepare a short devotional expanding it into a vision setting talk, followed by a discussion. These were semi-closed gatherings of 15 or so people, but not always the same 15 people. And they were not all composed of individuals interested in the church. One participant recalled that a Jewish woman attended a number of meetings. She apparently made it clear that she was not a Christian and did not intend to go to the church, but she was more than willing to offer "cultural" advice.

During one of the sessions, the group began the process of naming the church. "We were trying to come up with a name democratically," one participant told me. Eventually "Redeemer" was mentioned, and as there wasn't already a Redeemer Presbyterian Church in the area, the discussion continued. Participants asked friends and colleagues what they thought about the name – an informal market survey. One participant was convinced it sounded too "low brow," and that "The Church of the Redeemer" sounded better. Others believed that New Yorkers would prefer to have the denominational and historical link made explicit. "Redeemer Church," for example, seemed disconnected from anything historical. "Redeemer Presbyterian Church" showed historical connection with a known religious tradition. In the end, "Redeemer Presbyterian Church" was agreed upon. Today, members look upon the name as an appropriate reminder of the church's purpose in the city –"to redeem that which is lost."

The brainstorming sessions continued until April 23, 1989, when the first evening worship service was held in rented space at a Seventh Day Adventist church on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Adapting to the City's Style

Everyone agreed that Redeemer should be different from both liberal mainline churches and conservative evangelical churches in the city. Glen Klienkenect, a founding member and elder of Redeemer, who works with Campus Crusade's inner-city ministry,

Here's Life New York City, said, "New York needed a new wine skin." New York needed a different kind of church that was capable of reaching an audience not reached by established churches in the city. Speaking specifically of other evangelical and fundamentalist churches in the city, Glen noted, "There was nothing wrong with these churches – they were doing their work," but if the church was to increase the scope of its ministry to include new groups of people it would need a "new wine skin."

What was this new wine skin, and who were the intended people the new church would reach? The core of people talking about this new church were members of and ministers to the Manhattan professional community. They were – and are – educated business and creative professionals whose attitudes toward religion range from indifference to hostility. One lawyer I spoke with, a convert through the Balches' ministry and now a member of Redeemer, said that "Christianity was something other people did," perhaps because it was "pragmatically useful." But it was not for her. Her eventual conversion to Christianity surprised her.

Another Redeemer member who is an artist in the city said that she thought of Christian's as a political group – "a right-wing political group." One lady that I spoke with had spent her professional life as a singer and actress – and in regard to Christianity, had outright rejected it. "I was not baptized," she said, "not going to church and rather proud of it! I actually thought my Christian friends were sissies and superstitious, and that all that church stuff was for pathetic, unoriginal, dull and socially inept folks who didn't have enough gumption to think for themselves." Christianity was not something taken seriously. These new converts previously looked upon Christianity with skepticism, or as humorously irrelevant to real life.

Such statements are not surprising or new. Christianity, like any other religion, arguably lacks plausibility in the broader secular culture, especially among those who are most proximate to the secularizing forces of modernity. These social groups lack the social support that Berger identifies as being important to religious adherence. As

religion has receded from public life, it has taken up residence in the private spheres assisting individuals with identity issues but having little to say about public life. For the urban professional moving about in the most secularized contexts, religious orthodoxy would seem to be strikingly implausible.

The target group for the new church was single urban professionals – a group thought to be largely unconnected with the church. Only 26 percent of young adults (ages 18 - 29) attend church weekly.[126] In many respects these young professionals are the heart and soul of New York life and culture, but they are isolated from religion. One film and television producer I spoke with said, "In other parts of the country you come in contact with Christians with some regularity, but in New York it is different. You don't regularly meet Christians. You may walk by a church, but that is about it, and you don't take that very seriously."

The plausibility structures that Berger, Hunter and others argue are requisite for sustaining "faith" are lacking among educated young professionals in the city – in spite of the persistence of religion. There are churches in the city, but the case can be made that the young adults to whom Redeemer seeks to minister are not in them. Yet, for all the implausibility, Redeemer has connected with urban professionals in the city. Indeed, one New York journalist referred to Redeemer as "A Church Yuppies Can Have Faith In."[127]

Forging an Identity

"Revolutionary changes," Becker observes, "succeed when their originators mobilize some or all of the members of the relevant art world to cooperate in the new activities their vision of the medium requires."[128] Redeemer is not a work of art, in the traditional sense, but its leadership faced the same challenges Becker describes in

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[126] *The Gallup Poll: Public Opion 1997* (Scholarly Resource Inc: Delaware, 1998), 44.
[127] Kirkpatrick, "Jesus in New York: A Church Yuppies Can Have Faith In," *The Wall Street Journal* (June 1993).
[128] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 308.

producing change within an art world. Revolutionaries do not content themselves with the conventions of their world; rather, they challenge the status quo. They "attack, ideologically and organizationally, the standard activities" within their world at the time.[129]

From the beginning, church leaders were careful about crafting their identity. They identified the inadequacies of the present "religious world," and sought to articulate changes for that world. Founding members and leaders were particularly interested in forging a community connected with historic Christianity. That required, among other things, delineating similarities and differences between themselves and other churches – both liberal and conservative. Church leaders created a seminar, which they offered each semester, to introduce people to Redeemer and to the church's understanding of the historic gospel proclaimed at Redeemer. The class consists of seven sessions. Participants receive a manual that serves as a guidebook for those who attend, and perhaps join, Redeemer. It is a practical and functional, though not formal, constitution of the church's beliefs. The manual states,

> Many newcomers to Redeemer claim to be struck by how "different" we are from other churches. We now realize that nearly all New Yorkers who know anything of Protestant Christianity expect us to either be: 1) dispensational fundamentalist, 2) charismatic Pentecostal, or 3) liberal mainline. They have never seen a church that preaches the historic message of the Reformation.[130]

The manual goes on to delineate similarities and differences between the historic message of the Reformation and the three alternatives. The differences are understood to flow from a faulty understanding of the Bible's teaching on the kingdom of God. Dispensational Fundamentalist churches tend to see the Kingdom of God as a future reality. Redeemer, the manual states, shares a "high view of Scripture and a strong

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[129] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 304.

[130] *Introduction to Redeemer Manual*, January 1991.

emphasis on personal evangelism" with these churches. They do not, however, share the futuristic view of the kingdom which has lead to pessimism about the possibilities of social and personal change. This pessimism is alien to Redeemer's commitment to personal, social and cultural change. In addition, fundamentalist Christianity tends to be characterized by a "world-negating withdrawal, a 'fortress mentality'" alien to Redeemer's "world-engaging view."

On the charismatic front, Redeemer shares their optimism about "the presence of the King to break into strongholds of individual and corporate evil." Real change is possible and perhaps probable. Redeemer is also committed to "anointed worship and the ministry of the laity." However, the manual continues,

> but charismatics forget the incompleteness of the kingdom, making them naive about remaining sin in the heart, leading them to trust too quickly in the divine origin of their impulses, expecting "quick fixes" for complex problems, and holding an underdeveloped view of suffering.

Finally, the manual speaks to the things shared and not shared with liberal churches. Held in common is the commitment to "social justice," advocacy for the poor and oppressed, a belief that "unnecessary separation is wrong," and a cooperation "with other churches to bring Christ's kingdom in the city." Yet Redeemer finds itself "grieved over the devaluation of the historic faith, so that the infallibility of the Scripture, the deity of Christ, the necessity of the new birth, etc., are denied or compromised." Moreover, the manual asserts the serious nature of such denial and compromise by liberal churches: "If such compromise goes too far, we believe that modernist Christianity may not merely be a new version of the faith, but a whole new religion."

Redeemer is defining itself: Who are we? How are we different from other churches? What do we believe? The membership manual, the classes, the fact sheets in the front foyer, the brochures, the sermons, the informal conversations are all means of identifying and responding to the "religious world" of the day. Every convention, Becker notes, has its aesthetic, and violations of that aesthetic are not just different, they are

attacks on the moral order – they are distasteful, barbaric, even ugly.[131] Redeemer's leadership concluded that something was wrong with the moral order of the "religious world." Something had fallen out of fundamentalist, charismatic and liberal churches. Both conservative churches (fundamentalist and charismatic) and liberal churches miss some aspect of the historic gospel. Each segment of the church has thus compromised the memory of the gospel – a memory that must be recovered and rearticulated in the present cultural moment. Embedded within the defining process is an invitation to skeptics, agnostics and seekers to take another look – to bring their questions with them once again and not allow contemporary distortions to cloud their reasoning and quest for the "real thing." Keller's point is that something is lost in the contemporary church that Redeemer has sought to recover. In chapter five I will deal more fully with the way Redeemer defines the "real" gospel and the contextualization of that gospel.

Cultural Fit

In addition to recovering a memory of historic Christianity, the early organizers of Redeemer were concerned with the cultural fit of the church with the New York professional community. What kind of service would New Yorkers come to? What should the music be like? These are some of the questions discussed in the various brainstorming sessions prior to the church's organization. Again, we can look at this negatively and positively. Early members of the church expressed a cultural dislike for certain aspects of existing evangelical churches in the city. One interviewee described the Episcopal option as "an artsy downtown people;" another described one of the Baptist options as "all families" and the other Baptist church as "too ingrown, cliquish and spoke in Christian jargon."

Positively, church organizers knew that their clientele was primarily a single clientele. They were well-educated creative and business professionals who were committed to excellence both professionally and in their personal pursuits. Knowing that

[131] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 305.

the church must reflect this group culturally, Redeemer's founders determined that all aspects of the church's ministry must be characterized by excellence.

Image was an important consideration. Redeemer did not own or lease permanent facilities, so their packaging in print took on a greater importance. A logo was developed and printed on letterhead, business cards, visitor packets and bulletins, with a style that reflected the church as well. Organizers decided that musical excellence was also important, so in the early days they hired professional musicians from outside the church to achieve this goal. The morning service featured traditional hymns, while the evening service became a jazz-style service with both hymns and contemporary choruses. Hymns were interspersed within a liturgically based service more characteristic of mainline "high" churches than the liturgical styles of "low" church evangelicals. Worship leaders did not assume previous exposure to the liturgy of the church, language was kept simple, or explained.

The "preparation for worship" became a mini-lecture on the nature of worship as well as an invitation to worship. The public confession of sin was preceded with explanation as to its importance and meaning, and Redeemer's use was differentiated from liberal, fundamentalist and Catholic uses. Everywhere there was likely to be unfamiliarity or confusion with the practices of other churches, the pastors sought to explain the liturgical moment in non-jargon language. The order of service was clearly printed out in a Bulletin that also served as a small prayer book that could also be carried home. Many I spoke with said they kept their bulletins and made use of them in their private worship and devotion. After the service, attendants gathered downstairs for coffee, juice, pastries and bagels in order to get to know one another.

Summary

Throughout the process of planning and actually starting the new church, leaders and founders made explicit their commitment to being a church that connects with the Christian past, a particular past that they believed was compromised or forgotten within

both liberal and conservative churches. As noted in the previous chapter, the churches that comprise evangelicalism are in crisis – they are confused about what it means to be the church in this day. Alternative paradigms have arisen, the most prominent of which is the "seeker service." Like leaders within the seeker movement, Redeemer's church leaders and founders were interested in understanding the particular cultural make up of New Yorkers. Yet they did so within a broader framework of recovering the theological narrative of the Christian past – a narrative, leaders believe is obscured by both the liberal and conservative church's accommodations to modernity.

Robert Wuthnow notes that today "memory is being emphasized because memory is now increasingly problematic."[132] Remember what? We might ask. The past is considered fragmented not unified, subjective not objective, oppressive not liberating, darkness not light. In the words of one author, in the postmodern world, "truth is stranger than it used to be." Redeemer, above all, committed itself to recovering the *unstrange* truth of the Christian gospel.

Redeemer Presbyterian Church has become a community of memory – committed to looking behind evangelicalism to older narratives. Narratives of liberalism and conservatism that characterize and polarize the contemporary church[133] are believed to be insufficient narratives, in which the "Christian past" is lost or obscured. The historic gospel of the Reformation, is a third way, according to Keller, who believes and teaches that liberal churches generally express the love of God at the expense of the holiness of God, while conservatives express the holiness and justice of God at the expense of his love. Keller says the gospel of the reformation binds love and holiness, law and grace, duty and desire together. In one conversation, Keller spoke of his concern

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[132] Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the 21st Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1993), 47.
[133] See Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J., 1989).

when people from liberal and conservative churches in the city started showing up at services. He said,

> The thing that worried me is that as we got famous and started to get bigger we would start to attract people from left and right [from liberal and conservative churches]. I have found that when people come to us who have not in a sense been raised up in Redeemer – they bring a lot of baggage. They listen to me through the grid, and think they know what I am saying, but they do not. They read me from where they are coming from. A little on the liberal side, or a little on the "fundy" side instead of realizing that we are trying to bring about a kind of *revival reformation*.

According to Keller, the presence of transfers from other churches – evangelical and liberal alike – can put a strain on Redeemer's focus on revival reformation. Indeed, the cultural make up of liberal and conservative churches, including evangelicalism, is a restraint to that end.

Redeemer's successful entrée to the New York City religious economy can in part be understood in terms of its distance from evangelicalism, not its nearness. Redeemer has attacked the mores of both evangelical and liberal churches in order to establish an alternative church in the city. Culture is like a tool kit, Ann Swidler argues – it is a repertoire of habits, skills and styles from which people construct "strategies of action."[134] Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Swidler argues that cultural patterns form a structured pattern against which and out of which action and strategies surface. One's cultural tool kit is a guide to one's experience and interpretation of the world as well as to one's action in the world. The metaphor of a cultural tool kit helps explain both culture's durability and malleability. Swidler argues that in periods of "unsettled lives" or cultural crisis, "bursts of ideological activism occur when competing ways of organizing actions are developing or contending for dominance."[135]

Among the churches that comprise evangelicalism, new paradigms and critique from within and without, all point to the weakening of the taken-for-grantedness of

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[134] Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," 273.
[135] Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," 279.

evangelical culture. To borrow Swiddler's metaphor, its tool kit lacks the needed cultural habits, styles and perhaps more importantly, memories requisite to its existence. In the face of such uncertainty, seeker churches have looked outside of the church's organizational field to the market place for models of success. They seek renewal and reinvention through a revival centered on methods and technique, which is at least consistent with the adaptations of a previous generation that placed a great deal of hope in method and technique for growing religious revivals – often at the expense of tradition. Seeker churches have updated their methods and techniques according to the idiom of the market place. In the midst of uncertainties about the "workability" of traditional forms and methods, seeker proponents have looked not to the churches of previous generations, but to the market place itself for their methods. And as they have succeeded in attracting attendants – they have become popular models within their organizational field. The kind of isomorphism described by DiMaggio and Powell is taking place.

Keller, like leadership within the seeker church movement, has sought to assemble a new "tool kit." Like them, he seeks change. But unlike seeker churches that focus on method and style, Redeemer, though sensitive to cultural style, also seeks renewal along theological lines. Keller and the early leaders of Redeemer, like the mavericks of a previous generation, call the evangelical church to an earlier evangelical memory, and this in part requires a rejection of the evangelical habitus itself – of the conventions of evangelicalism.

In the end, however, Keller's appeal alone is not enough to sustain the recovered tradition. The revolutionary, Shils argued, must imaginatively envision what has not been done, but the resulting message, if it is to be sustained, must also be routinized.[136] Tradition remembered must be woven into the fabric of the church itself – it must become part of the institution. It is not enough to store and circulate taped messages of

[136] Shils, *Tradition*, 230.

sermons previously given. The broader leadership must, not only be mobilized they must also become adept at articulating the resolution between orthodoxy and secularization as well.

Dick Kaufman, former executive pastor at Redeemer, told Keller early on that they could not hire church planters from outside the church. Keller admitted that this sounded a little cultic. “I have friends and colleagues in the PCA,” Keller said, “who understand about this [Redeemer’s mission] and get excited about it. There are far more people I could pull into this. But as a general rule we have to find our own ways of training leaders.”

Statements like this, along with attempts to avoid the conservative “tag” associated with much of evangelicalism, as well as the liberal “tag” associated with mainline churches, are a window into the institutional crisis within evangelicalism. Keller’s own method and message emphasize the dramatic failure and inadequacy of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is deeply affected by modernity and particularly the logic of the market. In market terms, Redeemer fills an empty niche, and its relative success as a church that is at once, traditional and contemporary, points both to the weakening evangelical habitus as well as to the possibilities of orthodoxy.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GATHERED COMMUNITY: THE PEOPLE OF REDEEMER

Churches are comprised of people. They gather week after week to worship, to partake of the sacraments, to fellowship and to study the sacred texts. In this chapter we take a look at those who make up the congregation of Redeemer. Who are they? What are they like? Where are they from? Why have they come to the city? What are their plans for the future? In the next chapter we will consider more fully the beliefs, or the gospel, around which this community gathers, but for now – who makes up the congregation of Redeemer Presbyterian Church?

Eileen is an evangelist, not professionally, but in practice. I met her at the door of her upper West Side apartment, greeting guests who gathered for a Christmas party in honor of various church members and attenders who volunteer with Redeemer's Mercy Ministry to the city's poor and disenfranchised. I had been in New York nearly a month working on this project when I received a last-minute invitation to the party. The night was cold and rainy. I was glad for the unexpected invitation, stopped my dinner preparations, donned my coat and walked 10 blocks south to the party. Eileen had been, in her words, "a life-long atheist" who once thought of Christianity as "pragmatically useful for others," but not for herself.

As the party wound down, Eileen sat at the door chatting with departing guest – telling stories. Someone inquired about the person that Eileen had brought to church with her the previous Sunday. The inquiry was welcomed, and Eileen launched into a story. Eileen runs her legal practice out of our home, and a few weeks prior, a client had arrived just as she stopped working on a Bible study, leaving her theological books out on the desk. "I didn't have time to put them away," she told us, "but I didn't think much

of it. So he comes in and sits down and sees the books lying on the desk, and he says, 'So what are you, Catholic or something?'"

"'No,' I said, 'actually I am a born again Christian, can you believe it?'"

The man, according to Eileen, began to question her. "So does your church allow homosexuals to attend?" he asked.

"Yes, they allow homosexuals to attend – I mean I don't think they are going to ask you to lead a Bible study or something like that – but they don't hate gays."

"Well," he continued, "what do they believe about homosexuals?"

"They believe what the bible says about homosexuality," Eileen replied. She added somewhat humorously, "Homosexuality is listed in lists of other sins like gossip, slander, abusive speech. So don't think you have any sin up on anybody." Apparently the man appreciated her frankness and humor and asked if she had any information on Redeemer, indicating that he might be interested in attending sometime.

There was a sense of excitement among those lingering by the door to listen to Eileen's story – the story connected with the mission of the church to change New York. The story connected with the broader story told and retold Sunday after Sunday and all through the week – that the gospel is God's power of salvation, to all who believe.

Many of the people I spoke with told me that they ended up at Redeemer because a friend brought them. One respondent said, "The people are the drawing card." She visited at the invitation of friends, and such relationships have been the key to the growth within the church. Certainly, that is the plan of church leaders, who have pursued a strategy of utilizing relational connections in order to get the word out. Keller notes that this aspect of the church's ministry is the "human factor" contributing to the church's growth. In contrast to the modern church-growth emphasis on techniques such as advertising, mailings, tele-marketing or other "cold-contact" approaches, Redeemer's leadership have relied almost exclusively on members and attenders, like Eileen, to personally invite friends, colleagues and acquaintances, often giving them an intriguing

first taste of the good news. Apparently the strategy is working. As one respondent concluded, "Redeemer is reaching a segment of New York City that may have felt ambivalent toward church in the past."

Nearly 9 percent of the weekly congregation consists of attendants who identify themselves as new to Redeemer or as first timers. By 1992, three years after Redeemer's founding, church leaders estimate that 50 to 60 new people were attending each week. Over the last 11 years Redeemer has grown from a small Bible Study into a congregation with an attendance over 3,000 each Sunday. So who are the people who gather at Redeemer week after week to hear the gospel?

A Demographic Profile of Redeemer

On April 16, 1995, I surveyed the congregation of Redeemer during its worship services. Survey data from the 593 respondents, along with interviews and field observations, are the backbone of this profile. Redeemer is a young congregation comprised predominantly of single adults in their 20s and 30s. Many have come to New York to "make it" in their careers, as one respondent told me. The data provides a snapshot of their lives and activities.

Table 4.1
Age, Sex, Race, Marital Status

Age (N=589)		Race (N=590)		Sex (N=592)		Marriage (N=590)	
Under 19	2.0%	White	58.15	Male	40.4%	Single	73.1%
20-29 Yrs	45.8%	Black	2.5%	Female	59.6%	Married	26.9%
30-39 Yrs	31.2%	Asian	34.9%				
40-49 Yrs	13.2%	Latin	2.5%				
50-59 Yrs	4.4%	Other	1.3%				
60 & Older	3.2%						

Table 4.2
Children in the Church

Children (N=589)		No. of Children (N=98)		Age Child.(N=93)	
Yes	17.0%	1	49.0%	Birth to 12	52.7%
No	83.0%	2	33.7%	13-17 Yrs	8.6%
		3	11.2%	18 & Older	38.7%
		4 or more	6.1%		

Table 4.3
Married by Children

Count Row % Col %	With Children	No Children	Row Total
Married	*83* 52.2% 83.8%	*76* 47.8% 15.6%	*159* 27.1%
Single	*16* 3.7% 16.2%	*411* 96.3% 84.4%	*427* 72.9%
Column Total	*99* 16.9%	*487* 83.1%	*586* 100%

Compared to broader evangelicalism, Redeemer is strikingly different. For example, Redeemer is a church of singles. James Hunter's 1983 study of evangelicalism found that only 7.8 percent of evangelicals were single and 27.1 percent were under age 35.[137] In contrast, 73.1 percent in the sample of Redeemer's congregation indicated that they were single. When asked if any had ever been divorced, only 7.9 percent responded in the affirmative. Given the single status of the congregation as a whole, along with the low percentage of divorces, it is not surprising that only 17 percent of those within the congregation are parents. Nearly half (49 percent) of those with children have only one child, and 72.9 percent of the children in the church are under age 13. Only 16.2 percent

[137] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 50.

of the parents in the church are single parents. The data suggests that though mostly comprised of single adults, families *are* emerging within the congregation; marriages are taking place and couples are beginning to have children. And the church is responding: employing a full-time director of children's ministries and a pastor to families, as well as offering mothers groups, parenting classes and other activities oriented to families.

Redeemer is also a youthful church. Hunter's study found a fairly even age distribution among the evangelicals surveyed.[138] At Redeemer, however, the distribution is significantly skewed. Seventy-nine percent of those attending Redeemer are under age 40, with the majority under age 30 (45.8 percent were between age 20 and 29 and 31.2 percent were between 30 and 39 years of age). Only 13.2 percent of those attending Redeemer are in their 40s, with 7.6 percent indicating they were 50 or older. One possible explanation for the distribution of the data on age may have to do with the number of students who attend. Nineteen percent of those in this sample indicated that they were students, either in pursuit of undergraduate or graduate degrees. In the under-30 age group, 36.1 percent were students.

Redeemer, though significantly different from evangelicalism in terms of the marital status and age of its congregation, is very much like evangelicalism in terms of gender. As in Hunter's analysis of evangelicalism, there is a significant percentage increase (nearly 20 percent) in females to males (males – 40.4 percent; females – 59.6 percent).

In addition to being a young, single and majority female congregation, more "whites" (58.1 percent) attend Redeemer than any other racial group. Ninety-two percent of those indicating that they were white also indicated they were born in the United States. Though Redeemer is mostly white, its racial composition is more diverse than broader evangelicalism. Hunter found that 88.2 percent of evangelicals overall indicated

[138] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 50.

that they were white.[139] The next largest racial/ethnic group (34 percent) is the Asian population. Many (38.6 percent) indicated they were Korean by birth. Only 2.5 percent of the congregation indicated they were African American, and the same percentage identified themselves as Latin or Hispanic. Finally, of those attending Redeemer, 16.5 percent indicated that they were born in New York City, and 33 percent had lived in the city more than 11 years.

Social Class

Redeemer, as founding members and leaders indicated in the last chapter, began as a ministry to Manhattan's business and professional community. Church leaders consciously reached upward to attract that group. In the congregational survey we asked about the education, income and occupation of attendants in order to get a sense of the social class of those attending Redeemer. Table 4.4 shows the distribution of these variables.

Table 4.4
Social Class

Educ. Beyond High School (N=591)		Income (N=543)		Occupation (N=555)	
None	2.9%	Under25K	30.0%	Student	19.6%
1-5 Years	55.2%	25 – 50	39.2%	Homemaker	2.2%
6-12 Years	42.0%	50 – 75	13.1%	Retired	.7%
		75 – 100	5.7%	Professional	51.7%
		Over 100	12.0%	Laborer	.5%
				Skilled Labor	5.0%
				Arts	15.0%
				Clerical	5.0%

Studies of American evangelicals differ widely in their depiction of social class. For example, in Hunter's 1983 study, 92.9 percent of evangelicals indicated household incomes under $25,000, while the more recent work of Christian Smith found that only 34 percent of evangelicals reported incomes less than $30,000, and 56 percent had

[139] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 50.

incomes ranging from $30,000 to $79,000 a year.[140] The data from our sample depicts a congregation not that different from the evangelical of Smith's study. 30 percent of our sample indicated their annual income was under $25,000 a year, and half of those within this income bracket also indicated that they were students. We expect students to have a lower income now, followed by a strong income potential once employed full time within their professions.

Redeemer is solidly middle to upper-middle class, with 39.2 percent indicating incomes between $25,000 and $50,000. In comparison with Hunter's description of evangelicalism (with almost 93 percent indicating incomes under $25,000), Redeemer is quite different. City living is expensive. Small apartments rent for thousands of dollars a month. Hunter's evangelicals tend to live in rural towns with fewer than 2,500 residents (43.7 percent); only 8.6 percent resided in large metropolitan areas of 1,000,000 or more.[141] The professional context of Redeemer's congregation accounts for some of the difference in income. Nearly 52 percent (51.7 percent) of those attending Redeemer work in education, medicine, law, advertising, finance and banking. Another 15.0 percent work in the arts. This category includes visual and performing arts, as well as writing. Of the remainder, 19.6 percent are students; 5.5 percent work as laborers and skilled laborers; and another 5 percent work in clerical positions.

Redeemer is a highly educated church. Only 2.9 percent of the sample indicated that they had not continued their education beyond High School. In contrast, 75.8 percent of evangelicals in Hunter's survey indicated no education beyond high school, and many of them, less than high school.[142] At Redeemer, 42 percent have as much as 6 to 12 years of education beyond high school. If Redeemer leaders set out to minister to the educated professionals, they appear to be successful in their upward reach.

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[140] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 54 and Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 78.
[141] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 52.
[142] Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 54.

Religious Background

Redeemer is an evangelistically focused church. While its Leaders sought to reach the city's professionals, their intention was not merely to provide safe haven for Christian professionals but to also reach the unchurched and the non-believers with the message of the gospel. During my time at Redeemer I spoke with many people who, while they wouldn't characterize themselves as "evangelists," did regularly invite friends and colleagues to church events. In the congregational survey a large number of the respondents wrote in the margins that their introduction to Redeemer came through a friend. One woman wrote, "Redeemer is a church to which I could ask a skeptic to come without wondering if anything stupid would turn them off. Here, if they were turned off, it would be for the right reasons." Another person agreed: "It's a wonderful church to bring non-Christian friends to."

Redeemer is growing, and it does seem to be reaching the business and professional segment of the population. Yet most of those who attend have had some experience with church (table 4.5). Respondents were asked if they attended religious services growing up, and if so, were they Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or other. Eighteen point seven percent grew up Catholic, 67.8 percent Protestant, 1.7 percent Jewish and 1.2 percent other. Eleven percent indicated that they had no religious upbringing at all.

Similarly, respondents were asked if they had regularly attended religious services other than Redeemer during the past 10 years. 6.1 percent indicated that they had attended the Catholic church, and 82.1 percent indicated that they had attended another Protestant church. Ten point two percent of the congregation indicated that they had not regularly attended a religious service during the last 10 years. Overall, attendance seems to be of previously "churched" people. That is to say, those attending Redeemer have had some previous contact with the church during their childhood or within the last 10 years of their life. The data does not discriminate between casual or seasonal church going and regular attendance at a church. While most, who attend Redeemer, have some

church background, the data does not discriminate between conservative and liberal traditions within religion. Church leaders, I found, assumed some level of religious experience. For example, when staff evaluated elements of the church's worship service, they discussed possible misunderstandings attenders brought into worship from other traditions.

Table 4.5
Religious Background of Attendants

	In Childhood	Last Ten Years
Catholic	18.4%	6.1%
Protestant	67.8%	82.1%
Jewish	1.7%	0.2%
Other	1.2%	1.4%
None	11.0%	10.2%

Community Life

Finding the pulse of community is difficult. Many factors affect community. The simple fact that people move around has an impact, as does individual consciousness in regard to commitments to "place." New York City has long had the reputation as a port of entry for peoples of the world, but also for those within our own borders who come to the city, "to make it," in the words of one respondent. In order to touch on such issues, we asked about the number of years attendants had lived in the city, where they were born, how long they planned to remain in the city. Tables 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8 summarize these findings.

Table 4.6
New York Experience / Plans

Years Lived in New York City (N=581)

Under 1/2	1-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11-20 yrs	Over 20 yrs
3.4%	45.6%	17.4%	16.0%	17.6%

Future Plans to Stay in NYC (N=560)

1-5 yrs	5-10 yrs	Indefinite
40.2%	8.0%	51.8%

As a population, young professionals may be some of the most geographically mobile groups within our society. They are beginning in their careers and expect moves as part of their career climb. Redeemer may be tapping into this transient population. Though 16.5 percent of those attending Redeemer indicate that they are native to New York City, 49 percent have lived there no more than 5 years. Only 22.4 percent of those who have lived in the city less than 5 years are students.

Table 4.7
Years in New York City by Plans to Stay in Percentages (N)

	1-5 Years	5-10 Years	Indefinite	
Under 1 Year	88.9% (8)		11.1% (1)	1.6% (9)
1-5 Years	59.8% (155)	9.3% (24)	30.9% (80)	46.7% 259
6-10 Years	28.3% (28)	9.1% (9)	62.6% (62)	17.8% (99)
11-20 Years	17.8% (16)	3.3% (3)	78.9% (71)	16.2% (90)
Over 20 Years	16.3% (16)	8.2% (8)	75.5% (74)	17.7% (98)
	40.2% (223)	7.9% (44)	51.9% (288)	100% (555)

Table 4.8
Children by Plans in Percentages (N)

Row % Col % (N)	1-5 Years	5-10 Years	Indefinite	
With Children	27.6% 10.8% (24)	10.3% 20.5% (9)	62.1% 18.6% (54)	15.6% (87)
Without Children	42.2% 89.2% (198)	7.5% 79.5% (35)	50.3% 81.4% (236)	84.4% (469)
	39.9% (222)	7.9% (44)	52.2% (290)	100% (556)

City life can be hard on families. Such pressures and difficulties lead some young families to limit their time in the city – moving to the suburbs and commuting in for work or relocating altogether. Several of the young families I spoke with during my time at Redeemer spoke of the difficulties, and many indicated they had at least considered the possibility of a move. These pressures are real, but they are not the final or even the primary factor in deciding whether or not to leave the city. Redeemer's existence, along with their commitment to and involvement in the church, are factors in such decisions. Sixty-two point one percent of those with children have no plans to leave the city, and only 27.6 percent of those with children consider themselves short-timers (leaving within 5 years), whereas 40.2 percent of those surveyed indicated that they expected to leave the city within 5 years.

Getting Involved

The congregation of Redeemer church is highly transient, with 49 percent of those in our sample living in the city five years or less and 47.4 percent attending Redeemer for one year or less. The new people far outnumber those who have been in the church more than 3 years. In fact, 3.2 percent specifically indicated that particular worship service was their first time at Redeemer (Table 4.9). Another 5.6 percent considered themselves new to Redeemer. The impact of such turnover within the congregation has a certain effect – even those there the longest will likely see people they do not know. In some sense, nearly half the congregation on any given Sunday morning could qualify as "new." Still, of those who attend Redeemer, 77.8 percent attend worship at least three times a month, and another 8.4 percent attend at least two times a month, some of them because they worked in professions that affecting their Sunday attendance. Only 5 percent indicated that they attended less than two times a month.

Small Groups

Churches the size of Redeemer rely on sub-congregational gatherings and smaller groups to foster and build community, and to care for the needs of those who attend the

church. Opportunities for small group involvement at Redeemer are numerous. There are classes to attend, home Bible studies to attend and opportunities to serve as ministry volunteers as well. Redeemer has placed a lot of stock in its small groups. "While many congregations have small groups," Keller writes, "our congregation *is* small groups. We aim to be a cell group church [in] which every part of the body is divided into cells."[143]

In 1995 church leaders intensified their push for people to become involved in small groups, communicating that involvement in a small-group is what it means to be in the church. "One of the greatest things about Redeemer," one small group member said, "is the home-fellowship group. If you want community it is there for the having." She went on to admit, "I used to just want to come [to worship services] – I didn't want to be connected. I just wanted to come and slip in and then slip out; I didn't want friends or connections." Her practice of slipping in and out is not unusual. The data suggests that fewer than half those attending worship (40.3 percent) are also involved in small group Bible studies. Slightly more (44.7 percent) indicated that they participated in the Sunday morning educational classes the church offers. One explanation for the discrepancy is certainly the large percentage of the sample who indicated that they had been in the church a year or less (47.4 percent). One would not expect "new-comers" to immediately involve themselves more intimately in the church. Of those attending Redeemer two years or longer, there is a 54.1 percent participation in small groups. A more likely explanation, however, is rooted in the effect of consumer culture, individualism and privatization on individuals and the way in which they approach religion. Redeemer is a large church and that makes it safe for the spiritual skeptic or seeker – the curious can slip in and slip out with minimal notice; without having to "sign-up" or commit themselves in personal ways. Anonymity has a positive function.

Some, however, do involve themselves in the groups of the church. Redeemer is a church that ultimately challenges the aloofness and non-commitment of seekers. It

[143] Redeemer Vision Paper 1991.

does so through the preaching and teaching of the church. Christianity demands commitment; attendants hear this message weekly. But that message is sounded through the face to face relationships as well. Many of those who show up at Redeemer were brought to church by a friend and those friends are often the ones who challenge the non-committal stance characteristic of those who visit Redeemer. For example, the woman mentioned above not only joined a group, but now leads one with her husband. What precipitated the transformation? – a friend. "I used to leave and go right to the bars – I didn't see any conflict," she told me. Then, a friend said to her, "you know we have got to get you out of those bars – its about time you got some Christian friends." A year later she was regularly attending a Bible study. When she started attending she was startled to discover that the group already knew her – they had been praying for her for some time. "I had never been in a situation like this," she said, "people investing in your life; people caring about you." The home group connected her with the larger church and with its teaching. "I had never had a relationship with a church," she said, "even though I went to a Catholic church my whole life. It was like God was saying, 'you are going to learn how wonderful it is to be accountable.'"

Small groups are the church. Faith and commitment are forged in communion – not isolation. The face to face interactions are central to conversion[144] and to sustaining those commitments once they are made. As Durkheim shows us, the church is a moral community, not a clientele.[145] As pluralization, privatization and rationalization have come to shape the way in which people think of and approach religion, the face to face interaction between religious participants has become more important, not less. Such interaction is the context in which the creeds of orthodoxy are enacted and embodied,

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[144] John Loffland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* (30: 1965, 862-875). Also see, Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton Press: Princeton, N.J., 1996).

[145] Emile Durkheim, Elementary Forms of Religious Life (The Free Press: New York, N.Y., 1915), 60.

and thus, the principal defense to the skeptic of their weight and binding authority. Orthodoxy inheres in commitments – commitments to God and to one another. Apart from such involvement and commitment religious participants, far from experiencing "transformation" through faith in the creeds of orthodoxy, merely make therapeutic use of orthodox creeds.

Involvement in the church thus, includes much more than simply showing up for various church events, whether worship services, Sunday classes or even small-group Bible studies. Involvement is also about commitment. Commitments means surrender. One way of measuring commitment is to look at membership. At Redeemer, membership is not easily achieved. Interested persons must participate in a seven-week membership course, during which time they are introduced to the principal teachings and structures of the church. Once the class is finished, the elders of the church interview those who wish to pursue membership. These potential members speak to the elders about their faith in Christ in return, as elders seek to evaluate whether or not the person is truly a Christian.

Only 24.3 percent of those in our sample had committed to Redeemer through taking membership vows. Many indicated that they had not because they were students and would be moving, or because they were generally unsure about their future in New York. Others had not joined the church because they didn't consider themselves to be Christians. Church leaders estimate that 25-30 percent of those who attending each week are not Christians. Others who indicated that they had not joined the church wrote in that they intended to in the near future. The transience of the city has an impact on membership.

Another way to look at commitment is through ministry involvement. Do people give of themselves in acts of service within the church in some capacity? In the congregational survey we asked people to indicate if they were involved at Redeemer as a ministry volunteer. This would include helping out in any of the various ministries of the

church such as teaching children's or adult Sunday school, ushering, greeting, serving as an officer of the church, singing in the choir or mercy ministry involvement. The data show that a majority (72.4 percent) of those attending Redeemer are not involved as ministry volunteers. Again, the transience of the congregation likely effects ministry involvement, as does the social class of those within the church. Keller identifies New York's work-orientation as a contributor to the problem of commitment, noting, "The people who are making progress in their fields are usually working exorbitant hours." Given the transience of the church, the demands of the work-culture along with the prevalence of the therapeutic ethos within the lives of those who attend Redeemer, an involvement of 27.6 percent may actually be high.

Table 4.9
Participation at Redeemer

Yrs at Redeemer (N=585)		Membership (N=572)		Attendance (N=585)	
< 1	11.5%	Yes	24.3%	at least 3x/mo	77.8%
1	35.9%	No	75.7%	at least 2x/mo	8.4%
2	19.3%			< 2x/mo	5.0%
3	10.1%			New to Redeemer	5.6%
4	11.8%			First Time at R	3.2%
5	6.2%				
6	5.3%				

Table 4.10
Activity Involvement

Education Hour (N=591)		Small Groups (N=580)	Ministry Volunteer (N=579)
Yes	44.7%	40.3%	27.6%
No	55.3%	59.7%	72.4%

Summary

Redeemer has reached upward toward middle class professionals within the city. The congregation is young, committed to attending the worship services, but many are more reluctant to other forms of involvement and commitment. Small groups provide a context for face to face relationships and community for those that are willing to get

involved. Still, one of the most difficult things about Redeemer is its size. A majority of those attending Redeemer (54.6 percent) indicated that they felt only somewhat or not connected at all to the church. One respondent wrote, "Redeemer is great for me; it makes me think, really think about God's Word. The downside is that it is so big. It is hard to meet people or feel really a part of the church." Another person commented, "if you are shy you might as well be invisible." Involvement is the key to feeling connected I was told time and time again, yet many who attend Redeemer's worship services don't continue on with other forms of involvement.

The responsibility falls heavily upon the attendant to get involved – to pursue the connections that might flow more simply or easily in smaller congregations. The place for such connections, according to Redeemer's leadership, is through one of the many small-group Bible studies that meet throughout the city during the week. And while such opportunities exist and are encouraged, such involvement does not easily undo the problem of size. "Although I love Sunday morning worship," one attendant stated, "I feel like a stranger. I know those in my small group, but they are few – only three or four. I would like to know more." Another noted the same frustration commenting on Redeemer's small-group strategy, "the home group is one way" she said, "but its 10 people out of thousands." Others spoke of an excitement when they ran into someone from their group on Sunday morning. "I no longer want to leave the city," one person said, "because I don't want to leave the face to face frienships" – frienships that were forged within a small group.

The effect of the forces of modernity upon community is real. The pluralization, privatization and rationalization endemic to modernity are writ large in a city like New York. The data in this study at least indicate the tendency of church attendants to approach their religious life according to the logic of the market place. Even if religious institutions, like Redeemer, don't explicitly view their offerings as commodities, they operate within a cultural context that enables religious participants to treat religion as

they would any other aspect of their lives – as commodity. In the modern world religion is commodified; it is something added to one's life rather than a total reorientation of one's life within the religious community.

Not surprisingly, attendants often mention the teaching of the church as the reason for their involvement, not the community. One student in her final year at Columbia University lamented her return to upstate New York. "This is the best church I have ever attended," she said. "I will really miss the foundational messages next year when I return [home]. I will be praying that the Lord leads me back to NYC in the future." Though the person was clearly enthusiastic and supportive of Redeemer, she will miss the sermons not the friendships – not the community. She laments the loss of good sermons. Her experience of Redeemer appears to be individualized and her conception of the church seems confined to the creedal dimensions of the faith and not the community that sustains creedal life. The sermons, for people like this student, do not bind "believers" to one another; rather, the sermons are commodities.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO REDEEMER

To always be relevant, you have to say things which are eternal.
-- Simone Weil

Sermons are an important dimension of community. Community is sustained through the telling and retelling of stories. Bellah and the his associates, in their important work *Habits of the Heart,* write, "Communities . . . have a history – in an important sense they are constituted by their past – and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a 'community of memory.'"[146] Redeemer is a community of memory that gathers around particular stories of the Christian tradition.

At the center of Redeemer's storytelling, as in other Protestant churches, is the sermon. Sermons are central because the Bible is central. According to historic Presbyterian theology, the Bible is "the only rule of faith and obedience."[147] And sermons are the space in which the Bible is explored, interpreted, explained and applied to the everyday lives of the congregation. The interpretation and explanation of the Bible's teaching, centered in the preaching week after week, establishes and confirms the norm for beliefs and practice within the religious community. As such, sermons embody a church's response to its cultural milieu and are, in addition to offering explanations of the Bible's teachings, a window into the tension between church and culture. The sociological significance of the sermons of Redeemer is found in their articulation of the broader social and cultural context and the particular way in which Redeemer resolves the tensions it has with its culture.

The challenge before religious institutions of any generation is to discover ways of communicating old truths with relevance. George Whitefield, the Anglican circuit

[146] Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Harper and Row: New York, N.Y., 1985), 153.

preacher and revivalist, mastered the challenge as well as anyone in the eighteenth century. His preaching was innovative, Harry Stout observes, having more in common with the theater than traditional church.[148] Yet, Whitefield, like Jonathan Edwards his contemporary, was a Calvinist of the old school, believing and preaching the doctrines of original sin, total depravity and damnation.

God, in the preaching of Whitefield, is portrayed as merciful, loving and wrathful. For example, Whitefield, in his sermon *Marks of A True Conversion*, pleads with his listener to consider whether or not they are "true" believers. Apart from true conversion, Whitefield straightforwardly warns his listener, "ye shall certainly go to hell, ye shall certainly be damned, and dwell in the blackness of darkness for ever, ye shall go where the worm dies not, and where the fire is not quenched." A few lines later he pleads, "Precious souls, for God's sake think what will become of you when ye die, if you die without being converted; if ye go hence without the wedding garment, God will strike you speechless, and ye shall be banished from his presence forever and ever." Despite such prominent references to judgement and wrath, Whitefield's gospel was not dark news. Christ is "the way of escape," he told listeners. Yet, the orientation and focus of Whitefield's sermons, while compassionate, is not in the first place toward the listener. Rather, it is toward God who will judge the one who rejects his mercy. In another sermon Whitefield says, "Persons may play the hypocrite; but God at the great day will strike them dead for pretending to offer him all their hearts, when they keep back the greatest part."[149] In the end, Christianity is good for you because it is true and, because it's true, there are harsh consequences to unbelief.

Protestant sermons aren't what they used to be. Sermons, like those preached by Whitefield and Edwards belong to a previous generation. Marsha Witten argues, in her

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[147] *The Westminster Larger Catechism,* Question 3.
[148] See Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitfield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1991), xviii.
[149] George Whitefield, "The Almost Christian."

work *All is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism,* that today's sermons tend to be more accommodative than resistant to the forces of pluralism, privatization and rationalization. They are likely to deal with the psychological concerns of the hearers, tacitly ratify "capitalists notion of consumer choice," and focus issues of technique and style.[150] In short, pluralism, privatization and rationalization seemingly have left an imprint even on the sacred center of Protestant worship – its preaching.

Cultural pluralism blunts the sharp edge of Christianity. Accordingly, modern sermons are more civil than those of a previous generation. One is not likely to hear of sinners in the hands of anyone, much less an angry God. In accordance with the quiet faith Wolfe identifies in his study of the American middle class, the hard edge of religious dogma is blunted, reducing potential conflicts.[151] The ethic of civility and tolerance toward differing and competing moral views has meant that even the most religious Americans are softening the way in which they talk about their beliefs.

As the hard edges of Christian doctrine are softened, the kinder gentler side of faith is brought more and more to the forefront. Witten found that "in the majority of sermons (82 percent of sermons that centrally concern God), God is portrayed predominantly in terms of the positive functions he serves men and women. Chief among these functions is one that can be labeled 'therapeutic.'"[152] God is almost exclusively portrayed within his intimate familial role. Moreover, Witten argues,

> The picture of God in his transcendent role as awesome sovereign and judge is *laboriously debunked.* The two images are treated as if categorically incompatible with each other; the God who is motivated by nurturing love cannot, even in other circumstances, castigate and judge."[153]

The effect of pluralism is linked with the influences of privatization and rationalization. Privatization circumscribes the sphere of religious discourse to those

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[150] Marsh Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J., 1993), 131-133.
[151] Allan Wolfe, *One Nation After All* (Penguin Books: New York, N.Y., 1998), 52.
[152] Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 35.
[153] Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 38-39.

things that pertain to individuals. Christianity is presented in terms of its subjective benefit to the individual. Felt needs of listeners more and more shape the way the truths of the Bible are talked about with emphasis given to what God can do for the individual. In addition, the shift to the private sphere has meant that very little is said of the public implications of Christianity. Kimon Sargeant's study of seeker churches found that even when addressing more public issues, such as charitable activities, messages are cast in terms of the therapeutic benefit to the individual, specifically the issue of self-fulfillment.[154]

Rationalization, like privatization and pluralization has the effect of emphasizing both the benefits of faith and the more immanent and pleasant dimensions of Christianity largely because "it works." Hunter has shown the tendency for faith in the modern era to be standardized and subjugated to that which is pragmatically useful. Christianity is reduced to its market value – a value that is measured principally in terms of its utility. Thus, Witten observes, religious discourse increasingly "mirrors its popular, secular counterpart, the 'how-to' book."[155] Church doctrine is packaged in a consumable form; more complext doctrines are often simplified, if not outright neglected." Such accommodation, Witten explains, is an effort to "market" religion by means of setting before religious consumers positive, nurturing, rewarding images of God at the exclusion of images of the holy, wrathful and judging God.

The Sermons of Redeemer

Of the various aspects of Redeemer's worship, the sermon is given the most time – usually between 30 and 40 minutes out of the one hour, 15 minute service. In addition, the sermon dominates the Sunday educational hour. An entire class, following the worship service, is devoted to a discussion of the sermon, usually led by the senior minister, Tim Keller. There are other classes from which attendants choose, but the

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[154] Kimon Sargeant. *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2000), 79.
[155] Witten, *All is Forgiven*, 24.

sermon discussion, at least during my time in the church, was the largest of the classes. And the sermonizing is not limited to Sunday morning or evening activity. Sermons are spread abroad – literally. Redeemer has an extensive tape ministry that extends the church's message well beyond the boundaries of its New York City audience. So what do these sermons reveal? Where does Redeemer stand in relation to the trend toward accommodation? How have the pluralization, privatization and rationalization of the modern world affected its message?

Analysis of the sermons given at Redeemer is perhaps the best tool for answering these questions and for showing how Redeemer negotiates its contact with modernity. Over the last 11 years I have listened to many Redeemer sermons. For the purposes of this study I analyzed 42 in particular. These sermons cover the whole range of Redeemer's history. The sample includes sermons preached during my 8 weeks in Redeemer's in December 1994 and March-April 1995. Additional sermons were included because they shed light on Redeemer's conception of the concepts of God, sin and self that, in Witten's analysis, appear to be most affected by the forces of pluralization, privatization and rationalization. These sermons were transcribed, read and analyzed noting the way in which the themes of God, sin and self are developed in Redeemer's discourse. Finally, all of the sermons that I analyzed were written and delivered by the Tim Keller, Redeemer's senior minister.

Before considering the content of the sermons at Redeemer it is important to reiterate Tim Keller's prominence at Redeemer as the Senior Minister and principle preacher. Edward Shil's concept of revolutionary, is a fitting description of Keller's role in shaping Redeemer's message of the gospel. Keller is the one who imaginatively envisioned what has not been done, or at least what he and the early founders of the church perceived was lacking in the broader religious landscape of New York City.[156] He is the one who broadly articulates Redeemer's message, defines the direction, scope and

[156] Shils. *Tradition*, 230.

method of Redeemer's ministry in the city. He led the church in breaking with the routines and norms that had come to characterize the church; those routines were incompatible with his vision of the moral order.[157] In religious categories, the gospel that characterized the churches of New York City was incompatable with the "historic gospel of the Reformation." By consequence the church, while built around a particular message, is built around Keller as well.

Once again, leadership need not rest on personality; rather, it rests on vision, assessment and mobilization of resources requisite to overcoming the "gap" between assessed needs and the vision. Keller's leadership does not reside in his personal appeal or charisma. His "lecture" or dialogical style appeals to the educated New Yorker who is more comfortable with a lecture than a "preachy" sermon, but this is not a function of personality; it is contextualization – an aspect of mobilization of the resources necessary to bridge the gap between New York professionals and the creeds of orthodoxy. Keller's adaptation of the genre of preaching to a style that "fits" his congregation disarms resistance to what tends to be a highly traditional message. Further, though stylistic adaptation contributes to reception, people talk most about the sermons themselves, not the manner of presentation. "If someone is offended at Redeemer," I was told, "it is because of the message and not the cultural trappings." Style is important, but as a conduit for the message itself. The leadership of a church are important – their styles, their gifts, expertise and ideas shape the congregation.

As central as Keller is to Redeemer the issue is not ultimately an issue of personality. Keller's manner and style – intellectual, not preachy, dialogical – contributes to his success, but an appealing personality can affect no one without an appealing message. And the message of Redeemer is clearly appealing to the congregation. "Sermons are the hook that make you stay," I was told by one member. "When I return

[157] See Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery*, 129 – 130.

home, I will miss the sermons," the university student had said. What is it about the messages, the sermons that "hook" those who attend? Why will they be missed, if they leave? In this chapter we will take a look at the "appealing" message of Redeemer.

The Gospel Tradition

Redeemer's pastors and attendants talk about the historic gospel of the Reformation. Church founders make it clear that they have set out to change New York City – personally, socially and culturally. Such change, they argue, comes through the gospel alone. The word *gospel* is short-hand among Christians for speaking about Jesus Christ's life and work. The word comes from the Old English *gotspel,* that is, good tale. What is the tale told at Redeemer? Redeemer's pastors and attendants summarize the gospel's teaching with the following statement, "Though I am weaker and more sinful than I ever would have dared admit, in Christ I am more loved and accepted than I ever imagined possible!" This statement surfaces in sermons, in church literature, in discussions and in casual conversations. Consequently, the people of Redeemer have made it their own – repeating it in a variety of ways, rarely deviating from the basic form. One person I interviewed catechistically explained her relationship with God, "I am more sinful than I dare admit, but more loved than I dreamed possible."

The tale articulated at Redeemer has to do with sin, God and the self. Believing the gospel entails acknowledging that the self is deeply flawed and sinful, and that God has shown love to people through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to Redeemer's pastors, this is the heart and soul of the "historic gospel of the Reformation." Redeemer's message, as we will see, is a traditional message – replete with older notions of sin, God and self.

Sin

"The plight of modern man," psychologist Earnest Becker wrote, is that he remains "a sinner with no word for it or, worse, who looks for the word for it in a dictionary of psychology and thus only aggravates the problem of his separateness and

hyperconsciousness."[158] As therapeutic culture triumphed, older notions of sin become obsolete. In the last century, catechized children learning the *Westminster Shorter Chatechism*, when asked, "What is sin?" responded, "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God." Today, the authority of God, or anyone else, is eclipsed in favor of that of the self.

No other concept in our religious and moral vocabularies is so deeply affected by the advent of modernity. James Hunter, in his recent study of the formation of character and moral education found, for example, that a Catholic school was reluctant to speak of sin when addressing the moral failures of its students. Similarly, Hunter notes a Presbyterian youth minister's confession that he never "invoked the name or the example of Christ" in dealing with moral issues. And when a rabbi who works with religious education in Reformed synagogues was asked about the usefullness of theological concepts such as sin, he replied, "Sin isn't one of our issues. . . .It doesn't exist by us, for better or for worse."[159]

Evangelicals, too, as Hunter argues, display remarkable comfort with a "therapeutic understanding of morality and moral development," and offer very little in the way of resistance.[160] As old boundaries and notions of sin crumble, nothing has been put in their place.[161] Increasingly, sin is recast into the "feeling" and "health" language of the therapeutic culture.

Philip Rieff argues in his important and apocalyptic work, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*, that therapeutic culture has thrown off the restraints and boundaries of culture and "aims merely at an eternal interim ethic of release from inherited controls."[162] Further, Rieff writes that the religious elite has played into the

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[158] Earnest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (Free Press: New York, N.Y., 1973), 198.
[159] James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character* (Basic Books: N.Y., 2000), 145.
[160] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, 145.
[161] See Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, and *Evangelicalism.*
[162] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Harper and Row: New York, N.Y.,1966), 23.

hands of therapeutic culture, engaging in strategies of "acceptance, in the hope of being embraced by therapeutics," which, according to Rieff, is "a false hope" because, "the therapeutics need no doctrines, only opportunities."[163]

Despite sin's demise within therapeutic culture, it remains prominent in the sermons of Redeemer. Entire series are devoted to the topic. In early 1995 there was a 12-week series on the Seven Deadly Sins that included titles like, "The Anatomy of Sin" and "The Judgment on Sin." Again in 1996, another 12-week series on "The Faces of Sin" that described sin as: Predator, Self Deceit, Leaven, Unbelief, Self-righteousness, Leprosy and Slavery."

In addition to these series on sin, the sermons to which I listened readily reference the presence and problem of sin in one way or another. So what is being said about sin? Is this simply a case of "psychological man" using "god-terms" as Rieff argued would happen?[164] In some sense the mere use of the concept of sin is a form of cultural resistance. Sin is a "god-term" rooted in notions authority, standards and truth, and it may be somewhat impervious to redefinition. Pluralism challenges the binding address of the religious community and diminishes the concept of authority. This alone would weaken the theological concept of sin, but there is more. The negative dimensions of Christian doctrine, for example, notions of hell and judgement recede to the background as more positive dimensions of the faith are emphasized. In so far as it is difficult to think of sin apart from thinking of violations of truths and standards, to speak of sin, and to speak of it frequently, is a form of resistance to this pluralistic challenge.

Language, however, is not ultimately inviolable – meaning is fluid. The simple use of the term "sin" does not tell us about the nature and character of sin – merely that terminology persists across time. How is sin defined at Redeemer? In Redeemer's

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[163] Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 18.
[164] Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 27.

messages sin is more, but not less, than deviance from moral codes found within the Bible – the 10 Commandments, for example. Sin is much more than disobedience. It is principally and most basically conceived as a "disposition," an "attitude," "a posture of the heart." In a sermon titled "The Anatomy of Sin,"[165] Keller references Dorothy Sayers, a British author, to describe the nature of sin. He says,

> The character of sin is beautifully summed up in a little statement by Dorothy Sayers in which she defines sin as a deep interior dislocation of the soul. Its a wonderful phrase. When a hip or a bone of any sort is dislocated what's the problem? It's off center. It's not centered at the spot it should be and as a result it wreaks tremendous havoc. The muscles, the tissue – there's all this cutting and grinding, you see, and there is tremendous damage being done. Your hip doesn't work. You can't walk. You can't move. Sin is a dislocation of the soul – the soul should be centered on God. If there is a God, then he'd be the great creator, and everything in our life should revolve around him. But we said sin is the demand of the heart that everything, including God, revolve around me – my happiness, my goals, my agenda, what makes me comfortable. That's sin – a dislocation of the soul. And all our problems come from our unwillingness to center on him because we do not want to lose control.

In the sermons I studied sin consists in the first place of this "dislocation of the soul." Sometimes sin is described as a failure on the part of the individual to be "centered on God." the demand of the individual to define reality for oneself or the effort to define reality apart from any reference to God. For example, Keller, in a sermon on 1 John 2:18-23, tells his congregation, "There is a truth out there I have to bow to. There is a moral order. There is as much a moral and spiritual reality as there is a physical reality."[166] Sin has to do with the refusal to "bow" to God's conception of the moral order. In the same sermon, Keller acknowledges the prevalence of modern relativistic views of the moral order and says of those who adopt such a subjective view of truth, "He [the Apostle John] doesn't say, 'Ah, you don't believe Jesus is the Christ? I do. Well,

[165] Tim Keller, "The Anatomy of Sin," Part 1, January 22, 1995.
[166] Tim Keller, "The Truth and the Lie," March 12, 1995.

that's very interesting. You certainly have your right to your opinion; I really respect your opinion.' No, he says, 'You're a liar.'"[167]

In Redeemer's discourse, sin originates in the interior space of the self as the unwillingness and refusal to submit to God. It is infidelity to God – a rejection of God's counsel, and ultimately of God himself. Keller tells his congregation that though they refuse to allow God to "cross their wills," they do allow other things to cross their wills – they submit to other things. Individuals sin when they prefer sexuality, careers, financial success, relationships, happiness or anything to God. These natural desires and pursuits, Keller points out, are not sinful in themselves; they only become so when they are pursued apart from God – that is, when they are pursued out from under God's authority. Natural and good desires, rather than God, become a means to contentment, satisfaction, happiness and peace. Desire is not evil, but "inordinate desire" – desire untethered from God as the center – is the stuff that sin is made of. Keller, and the other pastors at Redeemer trace all problems and difficulties to this "false" centering of one's life –this "refusal to bow."

Sin, in this sense, is an intensely private and internal matter. This is not to say, however, that sin is subjectivized and relativized. Sin, as talked about at Redeemer is rooted in authority – specifically, the rejection of God's authority. It is about a refusal to "have your will crossed by God."[168] Biblical rules are authoritative rules. Keller begins with the reasons of the heart – that is, the submission of the inner self to God. Why doesn't a person listen to God, why doesn't a person follow God's ways? Human beings are "dislocated" from God in their inner person. There is a predisposition not to listen, to doubt, to question, to resist. Henry Farlie, in his work *The Seven Deadly Sins*, describes the disposition as follows, Our sin is that we are in the frame of mind to listen to the Devil, before we do what he asks of us, while our sinning is that, having listened to him,

[167] Tim Keller, "The Truth and the Lie."
[168] Tim Keller. "The Freedom of Obedience."

we do not then resist and so do what he has asked.[169] Sin as dislocation is the foundation of obedience and disobedience. External violations are predicated upon a deeper internal violation of the heart.

Keller tells the congregation that everyone is in this predicament – not just "bad" or "immoral" people. All people share the inner resistance to God. The difficulty, according to Keller, is not that we are sinners, because the good news of the gospel is that Jesus died for sin. Rather, the problem is that people are blind to their dislocation of soul, or if aware, they don't recognize it as a problem. Keller appropriates the language of therapeutic culture to address this problem – sinful humanity is said to be "in denial," a denial, according to Keller, that necessitates an "intervention." Explaining a passage from Jeremiah chapter two in which Jeremiah discusses the tragic events being experienced by the Jews of his day, Keller says,

> Sin is denial. Look at the language he uses. 'Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you.' Do you know what this language is? This is intervention language. Let's say the wife of a friend calls you up, and she says, "You know for years he's been covering something up. There's destructive behavior in his life. He's been covering it up. He's been hiding it, but it's come out and he still won't see it. Please come over here and tell him what he's doing." So, you go over and you sit down and hear his story – you start to talk. What do you say? You say, "Can't you see? Don't you see what you're doing to yourself. You are killing yourself." That is the language of intervention for a deluded loved one. This is the language God uses on us. What we learn from this passage, what we learn from the Bible [is that] the root of our problems is the force field of denial that sin always entails.[170]

Sin is a universal problem of humanity. No one escapes being sinful, and no one escapes denial of his or her sinfulness. Sin by its nature includes an unwillingness to admit the extent of one's sinfulness. It is deceitful. Keller is well aware that such a view is not popular with moderns. Responding to critics, he adds,

> You will not see the extent and magnitude. Oh yes, we of course say, "I'm a human being, I err, I'm flawed." That's not to admit that you're a sinner.

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[169] Henry Farlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, In. 1978), 21.
[170] Tim Keller, "The Anatomy of Sin," Part 2, January 29, 1995.

> That's not to admit that you're a helpless sinner – that we're way off center because we center on ourselves – that we're capable of tremendous evil.[171]

Keller connects the world of his listener with the world of the Bible, walking between the culture of his listeners and the Bible itself. The sinner, living in denial, it is argued, lives in an unreal world of his own making. "Sin is completely out of touch with reality." It is a refusal to listen to and submit oneself to God's interpretation of reality and to take it seriously. Keller notes,

> Many people say, "I believe in the law of God, in general. I think the 10 commandments are great – I really do – most of the time. But you know we can take these things too far. I mean, if you're honest all the time in New York, you'd never make any money at all. If you are sexually pure all the time you'd never have any fun. The moral law is pretty good up to a time, up to a place. But you know you can over do these things." Consider and realize you are in denial as to how powerful sin is. You can't cut corners with the law of God – to do that shows that you have no idea the power that's within you. You have no idea about how pernicious and how pathological – you have no idea how deadly sin is. When you say, "Ah, I can play around with it. This is a gray area. I don't know if it's right or wrong. Who knows, what the heck." Consider and realize. We all tend to deny. We all tend to underestimate.[172]

Further, Keller urges upon the listener that much more than personal "sinfulness" is being denied, that it is the power of sin as a destructive force that is also denied. Here, the view of sin as behavioral deviance surfaces with force. Keller is saying that you can't engage in "wrong" behaviors and not be hurt by them – they kill you. "Obedience is difficult," he tells the congregation, "but disobedience is impossible; and it's killing you." What does he mean – "impossible?" Again, the power to kill arises in sin's "out of touch-ness" with God's reality. Reality is not open for negotiation. Rather, God has spoken, and he has spoken in the Bible. And his words are authoritative for life. The clear message at Redeemer is that only God's interpretation is the correct one, and

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[171] Tim Keller, "The Anatomy of Sin," Part 1, January 22, 1995.
[172] Tim Keller, "The Anatomy of Sin," Part 1.

failure to live within the bounds of that interpretation is ultimately destructive – and thus, an impossibility of sorts that Keller argues will catch up with the transgressor one day.

In a sermon titled, "The Truth and the Lie," Keller forthrightly tells the congregation,

> You can either bow to it now, or you can bow to it later. You can bow to it now willingly, or else you can bow to it later un-willingly. The Bible says on the last day some will say to the rocks, "fall on us," and to the mountains, "cover us and hide us from the face of him who sits upon the throne." In other words, you can pay me now or you can pay me later.[173]

Sin is rooted in a personal refusal to be centered on God and, as a consequence, a refusal to submit to God's rules for living. The sinner is said to be in denial of both.

Keller connects this dislocation to the traditional concept of the "fear of the Lord." When something is feared, Keller explains, you "cannot do anything without reference to it."[174] And to fear the Lord "means he is absolutely central. You can do nothing without reference to him. No matter what you do, you say, 'how does this involve God. How does this affect my relationship with God?' because you see the magnitude of who he is and the greatness of who he is." Keller adds,

> You say sins are violating the law. And when you lie, when you are selfish, when you are cruel, when you do these things – that's sin. Well, God says, "But why would you ever do it? Why would you ever disobey? Why would you ever be cruel? Why would you ever lie?" And the answer is whenever you sin in a particular way -- at that point you are holding something in more awe than you are holding God in. Something you find more wonderful than God. Something more dynamic than God. Something more captivating than God. And at that point you sin.

This concept of sin as defiance or rejection of God's authority is central to the gospel preached at Redeemer. "Christianity," Keller notes, "is not something you add to your life. You can't have God at times. You can't have God as a vitamin supplement.

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[173] Tim Keller, "The Truth and the Lie," March 3, 1995.
[174] Tim Keller, "The Anatomy of Sin," January 22, 1995.

How can you relate to him [God] in any other way, unless you relate to him with complete and utter and unconditional devotion?"[175]

The gospel as it is explained at Redeemer has to do with coming out of "denial" and acknowledging the depths of one's sinfulness. Sin is real, there are consequences to sin and ultimately sin has to do with one's posture toward God. In seeing the way that Redeemer acknowledges and defines sin, one begins to see the focus that permeates all aspects of Redeemer. This focus, however, seems strangely out of place in the modern and postmodern world in which reality lacks depth and distinction. Nearly every aspect and dimension of social life argues against the plausibility of such distinctions. Yet, it is the assertion of distinction and depth – of the concept of sin itself – that draws and holds the attention of those who attend Redeemer. Attendants say the sermons are "enlightening," "intellectual" and "relevant." The loss of god-terms has not, in the end meant a loss to the substance represented by those terms. People are still curious about sin, though they no longer have a word for it.

God

Redeemer's concept of sin is closely linked with its concept of God. The relocation of authority in modern life from transcendence to the needs and rights of the self has meant the loss of absolute distinctions. Sin, when discussed, is understood principally in psychological terms rather than as resistance to transcendent authority. Sin in Redeemer's usage is principally understood as a failure of allegiance to God. How is God portrayed at Redeemer? In relation to the doctrine of sin, God is portrayed as the only one worthy of absolute commitment, allegiance and awe. Redeemer's conception of sin flows out of its conception of God. God is a "king," "the creator," "holy" and "majestic," "beautiful" and God's interpretation of the real world is the correct one, and *everyone* must bow to his view, to his truth. God is straightforwardly portrayed as the God who will judge those who do not fall in line with his ways. He is a God who punishes.

[175] Tim Keller, "The Anatomy of Sin," Part 1.

Keller says of God, "You can pay me [God] now or you can pay me [God] later."[176] People cannot have God any old way they want him – on their terms. There are serious consequences to the one who does not bend the knee to God' terms. At Redeemer, Christianity is the exclusive way to God – to refuse it is to face the divine wrath.

The pastors at Redeemer maintain that the message of Christianity is hopeful. God is transcendent and immanent. He is the God who draws near his people in love and mercy as well as in judgement and wrath. In the modern era the kinder, gentler side of God, his familial relation for example, is expounded often at the expense of his holiness. As Redeemer's summary of the gospel would suggest, the two aspects of God's character are held in constant tension in Redeemer sermons.

God is not only with great regularity portrayed in his transcendence, he is also portrayed in his immanence. God is merciful and gracious, friend and lover. He is the God who has "made himself vulnerable" to his creation in taking on human form. The pervasive quality of God that is referenced time and time again is his familial role. He is the "far away God who comes near" as a Father through Jesus Christ. And the Christian is one who is adopted into his family. Attendants are told that being "an adopted child of God is the very essence of what it means to be a Christian."

The theme of God as a loving and gracious Father is prominent in Redeemer's articulation of the gospel. Non-believers are called upon to come to know God as Father through repentance and faith in Christ. They are urged to experience "rebirth," that they might know God and experience "his love lavished upon" them. God becomes to those who belong to him a Father who loves and accepts them rather than a judge who will condemn them. The Christian comes to the "throne of Grace." According to Keller, "the essential message of the Bible is that the great and powerful God sent his son to die for you so that the great God can become your father." Referring to the parable of the Prodigal Son, Keller adds,

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[176] Tim Keller, "The Truth and the Lie," March 12, 1995.

> He [the prodigal son] comes back and he says, "Father I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, just make me a servant. I owe you." Once he comes to the father and says, "You don't have to be my father any more just be my king." The king turns into a father and he says, "Get out the robe, put a ring on him, put my robe on him, kill the fatted calf; we're going to have a party. He is my child." And that message – that in Jesus Christ this great king becomes your father – is what you delight in.

Notice that salvation begins with submission to the father as King – rebirth is bound up with a change of heart toward God. The prodigal receives great love from the father as he bows the knee before his authority. The parable shows us a humble, de-centered son, and a father who loves lavishly.

Again Keller notes,

> Jesus does not start the Lord's Prayer, "Our King," though he is. He does not start the Lord's Prayer with "Our Creator," though he is. In fact, he doesn't even start the Lord's Prayer, "Our friend." Those are all true. God is our friend. God is our king. God is our creator. He says, though, you have to start "Our Father" because those two little words will control everything else about your relationship with God.

The idea of adoption must be central to any interaction with God. "You've got to saturate yourself in it," Keller adds. "You've got to rejoice in it, and that's the fire that fuels access into the presence of God. That's the thing that changes the throne of the universe into a throne of grace." God is a Heavenly Father. He is far away (that is heavenly) and he is near (that is fatherly).

If God is generally spoken of as the loving father who draws near humanity, what are we to make of the less-positive images of God – God the wrathful judge or God the absolute authority – images that are also prominent in the sermons of Redeemer? The church's teaching on sin notes that humanity, dislocated from God, is spinning out of control and will one day crash into God's wall of reality once and for all time. Disobedience kills, Keller says. In other words, humanity can't live just any way it wants. There are consequences to be faced. But how does this view of God as a judge, or as the one who will one day bring everyone into conformity with his will, square with the view

of God as a loving Father who has come near his creation? These images of God appear to be contradictory. If human beings are sinful, unholy, dislocated from God, and if living out from under God's authority kills, it would seem that if God drew near, he would not come as the loving Father – but only as the wrathful judge. What happens to sin? What happens to wrath?

The message of the gospel is a hopeful, not a despairing, message that Redeemer's pastors and members assert is the key to any lasting change. So what happens to sin and to wrath? Does God just draw near, hiding his wrath? Does he turn a blind eye to the disobedient, overlooking their off-centeredness? The good news of the gospel is not that wrath is hidden or that sin is overlooked. No, as noted above, Redeemer's pastors acknowledge freely that sin is real – sin is spoken of candidly. Wrath is also real. There are consequences for the one who does not bow the knee. The good news of the gospel is that wrath falls on Christ. Jesus, the Son of God come in the flesh, is the only one who ever lived a life centered perfectly on God, and he alone is unworthy of wrath and judgment. Yet God drew near in the person of Christ for the purpose of living a life of perfect obedience and allegiance to God the Father, and of suffering under the wrath of God for the sins of the world. This is the gospel preached at Redeemer week after week.

Christianity is different from any other formal or informal religious practice, Keller often tells the congregation in that Christianity is for the "good" and the "bad" alike. For example, Keller observes,

> There are two kinds of people. There are religious people and then real Christians. And the way that you can tell the difference is that a real Christian sees that he's totally in debt to God. But a religious person is someone who is working and making an effort and trying to be good and going to Bible studies and saying "no" everywhere. And denying themselves a lot of pleasures and so forth. A religious person is someone who is trying to put God in their debt – that is the difference. A religious person is trying to save themselves through their good works.

He adds that real Christians possess what he refers to as a "spirit of wonder." Real Christians, he tells his congregation, are

> always looking at [themselves] and saying, "me, a Christian – incredible, miraculous, unbelievable, a joke." But [with] a person who is trying to put God in [his] debt, there is none of that spirit of wonder at all. For example, when you get your paycheck, what do you do? Do you say, "behold, you have paid me. You've given me money." No, you don't do that. You say, "Of course you paid me, I worked." My friends, if you are a Christian there is no of-courseness about it. Not one bit.[177]

The Christian is someone who has learned that God is not his debtor; rather he is God's debtor. Recall the problem of sin as it is articulated at Redeemer – the choosing self is at the center in defiance of God, thereby making sinners subject to God's wrath. The good news of the gospel, as it is preached week after week at Redeemer, is that God drew near and took his "own medicine" – Jesus came and he lived a life centered on God, and he died an undeserving death – wrath falls, but on Jesus Christ. There is nothing particularly new about Redeemer's articulation of the gospel. The Christian church has historically understood and taught that Jesus Christ is a substitute for sinners. Judgement and forgiveness mingle in the historic gospel as it is portrayed through Redeemer's sermons.

Redeemer's good tale is talked about over and over and over again in the public and private conversations at Redeemer. Members hear it, they respond to it, and they tell others about this newfound hope. They take comfort in the message – a message that gives them a word for their sin, and at the same time a message that tells them it is possible to look into your sin, not over it, and yet not be crushed, because in Christ there is great hope, great love, great acceptance with the Holy God who drew near. The gospel message as it is preached at Redeemer is complex and riddled with the tension between God's love and holiness. God is holy and he is love.

Self

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[177] Field notes April 1995.

One of the most significant developments in the modern period is the ascendancy of therapeutic culture. I do not use this term to address the practice of psychological therapy, but rather the way in which a therapeutic view of life has come to permeate modern existence. In this regard, therapeutic culture is in many ways the embodiment of cultural pluralism, privatization and rationalization characteristic of the modern age.

Alexis de Toqueville feared that American individualism would eventually merge with egoism and destroy all public virtue, leaving the individual isolated from the past, present and future – "shut up in the solitude of his own heart."[178] That day, Philip Rieff argues, has come to pass. He writes,

> The individual is thus, in de Tocqueville's grand diagnosis, the defaulted citizen; he has cut off his feelings from communal affections. Individuals learn to feel that "they owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man.". . . In a highly differentiated democratic culture, truly and for the first time, there arose the possibility of every man standing for himself, each at last leading a truly private life, trained to understand rather than love (or hate) his neighbor.[179]

The wisdom of this emergent social order, Rieff argued, would not reside in,

> right doctrine, administrated by the right men, who must be found, but rather in doctrines amounting to permission for each man to live an experimental life. . . . Psychological man, in his independence from all gods, can feel free to use all god-terms; I imagine he will be a hedger against his own bets, a user of any faith that lends itself to therapeutic use.[180]

Salvation, if it exists for psychological man, consists of successful detachment. Ours is a culture that has abandoned the "shalt not's" of culture in favor of release from constraints. These changes are ubiquitous, and Rieff argues that even those institutions that continue to assert the possibilities of community have accommodated to the whims and dictates of therapeutic culture. He writes,

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[178] Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America* (Anchor Books: New York, N.Y., 1969), 506-508.
[179] Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 70.
[180] Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 26-27.

> The spiritualizers have had their day; nowadays, the best among them appear to be engaged in a desperate strategy of acceptance, in the hope that by embracing doctrinal expressions of therapeutic aims they will be embraced by therapeutics; a false hope – the therapeutics need no doctrines, only opportunities.[181]

What of the sermons at Redeemer? How do they resolve the tension between religion and culture in its discourse to psychological man? At the heart of Redeemer's message is this notion that the self is sinful and needs to be saved – from God's wrath to speak negatively, but positively the self needs to be saved to God and his people. The sermons of Redeemer acknowledge the therapeutic triumph, but co-opt therapeutic discourse to the biblical discourse on the self, sin and God.

Forays into the vocabulary of therapeutic culture abound: sinners are "in denial," God performs an "intervention," the centrality of themes of love and acceptance, definitions of sin that include a focus on the internal dynamic of the soul, as well as numerous references to the self and various identity issues highlight the therapeutic concerns pervasive within the present cultural setting. Sermons are replete with references to the therapeutic culture of the person in the pew. Yet, such references cannot simply be understood as accommodation. Accommodation is not merely a matter of discussing the troubled modern self or making use of a therapeutic vocabulary.

Therapeutic culture is a light for Keller's articulation of the gospel. By listening to the culture at hand, he learns something of the issues facing his congregation. If modernity has left the self fragmented and homeless, as is argued, then religious discourse, if it is to be credible at all, must meaningfully face the very real problems of modern people. Scott Sherman, a former pastor at Redeemer, said, "You find yourself addressing new concerns of a 'therapeutic' culture and therefore spending a lot of time talking about how salvation gets your life together, but you don't stop there. You move beyond this into real worship and real discipleship." Even in speaking of the benefits of a

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[181] Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 18.

life reassembled by the gospel, Keller assures listeners that the benefits are real, but that they are by-products, not the object of pursuit.

For example, recall Keller's definition of sin as a dislocation of the heart – a refusal to be centered on God. It is not enough to add God to one's life he must be made the center – and that because he is worthy of the position, not because of what he can do for the sinner. For example, in a sermon on Psalm 1, Keller tells the congregation, "Happiness is only and always a by-product of seeking something else more than happiness. Blessed is he who hungers and thirsts after righteousness. Blessed is he who hungers and thirsts after something more than blessedness." Later he adds, "If you come to him to make you happy, you are coming to a false God."[182] Keller makes a subtle assumption about the modern self – he assumes that psychological-man approaches God as he does the rest of life – for his therapeutic utility. He assumes that the person in the pew is a consummer.

Therapeutic culture gives shape to the conversation. Though the gospel at Redeemer mirrors the realities of therapeutic culture, it does not do so absolutely. The sermons of Redeemer engage the real issues of congregation but are not defined by them or limited to them. The gospel is also a light shining into therapeutic culture. Keller's description of sin and of the hope for salvation affirms the possibility and existence of positive community to which believers may "belong." Keller is obviously aware of the difficulties surrounding commitment and community. His description of life in the modern world in many ways mirrors that of Rieff, Bellah, Berger and others, who delineate the negative impact of modernity upon the self. Sinfulness is seeking to live autonomously; it is individualism gone mad; it is non-commitment to any standard other than one's own; it is lawlessness or becoming "a law unto oneself." Yet even as Keller articulates a concern for the loss of self – for the "rootlessness" of the modern self – the

[182] Tim Keller, "Psalm 1, Modern Problems Ancient Solutions."

listener is left with the impression that the modern question "Who am I?" may not be so modern after all, and certainly that solutions are found in the past.

Summary

"The Gospel," one attendant notes, "diminishes the distance between then and now." The past and the present join and interact. Communities are constituted by their past, but sustained community, as the authors of *Habits of the Heart* contend, depends upon conversations between the past and present. Such conversations establish continuity.[183]

Pluralism, privatization and rationalization get in the way of those very conversations. The religious are confronted with multiple narratives or, to borrow the religious language, multiple "gospel's." Technology and mass communication create and sustain a multiplicity of messages. Sermons, Witten observes, have accommodated, and in so doing theological concepts of sin, God and self have changed. If the challenge before the religious community of the eighteenth century was "to make inherited ideas come alive in ways that would speak compellingly to the rapidly changing landscape,"[184] the challenge for orthodox churches of our century likely includes recovery of the "inherited" ideas themselves. Today's religious messages tend to be more privately focused on individual issues, and the rationalistic logic of the market place includes a "how-to" spin on the once transcendent dimensions of the message. Christianity is good for you, listeners are likely told, in contrast to Whitefield's preaching, because "it works."

Therapeutic culture is writ large within the religious institutions of our day, where salvation has more to do with distance and detachment than commitment. The gospel articulated at Redeemer Sunday after Sunday speaks of the opposite path – attachment and commitment to God alone as the way of salvation. Like the sermon's of Whitefield mentioned earlier in this chapter, the overarching message of Redeemer is that the

[183] Bellah, et. Al., *Habits of the Heart.*
[184] Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, xviii.

transcendent God of the Bible, not the consuming self, is central. This is perhaps one of the ways in which Redeemer stands against its culture. Further, the dominance of secularization in general and therapeutic values specifically gives shape to the way the pastors address this issue. Pastors can not assume, as Whitefield did, that listeners know or even tacitly affirm the basic doctrines of sin and judgement. "I suppose, I may take for granted," Whitefield preached, in "Marks of a True Christian,"

> that all of you, among whom I am now about to preach the Kingdom of God, are fully convinced, that it is appointed for all men once to die, and that ye all ready believe that after death comes the judgement, and that consequences of that judgement will be, that ye must be doomed to dwell in the blackness of darkness, or ascend to dwell with the blessed God, for ever and ever.

If Protestant sermons have changed, the times have changed much more. The secularizing forces of pluralization, rationalization and privatization have meant among other things that such assumptions are unfounded.

On a Sunday morning as a group of attendants were received into the membership, Keller told the group, "Our culture would tell you that what you are about to do makes you less human – not more. But God is a God of commitment, and so the more we commit ourselves to him and to one another, the more we become like him, and so become more human."[185] Redeemer is a community of memory where the past ways of attachment and participant membership are central to fulfillment, to humanness, to salvation.

Redeemer's gospel is a traditional gospel – it connects with the past, and at the same time, it is a present gospel – it is connected with the struggles and dysfunctions of its congregates. The past and the present unite in the messages preached at Redeemer Sunday after Sunday. The congregation hears someone who knows their "issues" – someone who talks about the complexities of their lives, and yet, someone who believes

[185] Field notes December 12, 1994.

deeply that the key to their “issues” is the historic gospel – and perhaps simply, that someone believes there are “real” answers. Those who attend Redeemer are not slack in their praise of the church and particularly of its sermons. “The sermons are the hook.” The attraction to sermons that are characteristically orthodox is a window into the tensions of secularization. Though much in our culture undermines the possibility of a sacred moral order, interest in religious orthodoxy raises questions about the lower limits of secularization.

Though there may be a limit to secularization, pluralism, privatization and rationalization are not easily resisted or overcome. Reviving the creedal life of the Church through its message is a beginning not an ending to the conversation between past and present. Living within the taken-for-granted world of that message is more complex than simply hearing it. In the chapters that follow we will look at the ways in which this message is enacted and embodied in the practices of the congregation.

CHAPTER SIX

CROSSING THE DIVIDE: COMMITTING TO THE GOSPEL

As the light of Faith grows dim, man's range of vision grows more circumscribed. . . . As soon as they despair of living forever, they are inclined to act as if they could not live for more than a day.[186]

-- Alexis de Tocqueville

Religion is from the Latin form, *religio* – it means to reconnect. In the last chapter we saw that Redeemer's message unites present and past in dialogue. Redeemer is a church connected with the Christian past. Yet, reversing the tide of secularization is a much greater process than recovering fidelity to the traditional message of the gospel. That message must be inacted and embodied in the lives and practices of the congregation.

"Salvation" is fraught with difficulties not only from within, as Redeemer's notion of sin would suggest, but from without. The progress of secularization embedded in the development of pluralism, privatization and rationalization work against the "saving" work of the church. Pluralization not only confronts would-be converts with doubts about any world view, it creates options. Privatization reestablishes religion as a "private" practice – a preference, a perspective, a hobby – not a life altering and integrating view of all aspects of life and world. Rationalization sustains the evaluative gaze on the "workability" of religion – is this working for me, do benefits outweigh costs? The forces of pluralization, privatization and rationalization give today's secularization the shape and style of the market place.

Beliefs are not firm, they are negotiable. The remedy to pluralization, privatization and rationalization is commitment. Redeemer messages speak of "submission," "having one's will crossed," "bending the knee," coming to God on his

[186] De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 548.

terms and as an end unto itself, not as a means to one's own agenda. Salvation means rejecting the alternatives that pluralization embodies; it means going public with one's religious commitments; and it means seeking God as an end not a means. Salvation is about crossing the divide from unbelief to belief – it means commitment.

In this chapter we consider the individual and liturgical responses to secularization. We must look at the lives of real individuals – those who hear and respond to the message of Redeemer's gospel week after week. Further, the exchange between individual and message is mediated by a larger context – the ritual of worship and the broader communal ties that exist or don't exist within the congregation.

The three individuals discussed in the sections that follow are people who have crossed the divide between unbelief and belief – those who have come to "belong." I have altered the more superficial aspects of their lives in order to conceal their identities. They are, however, real people who are representative of the others (35) I interviewed during my time at Redeemer. They are also representative of the kinds of people Redeemer's leadership have sought to reach – Manhattan professionals – thought to be among those most insulated from religion.

Finally, because the stories that follow are real and reflect the language in which they were told, they may have a provincial ring to the reader's ear. The language, for example, will be more or less unfamiliar the greater one's distance is from the church culture. Moreover, some may find it offensive, off-putting, unsophisticated, sexist and in one case, homophobic. Ironically, our increasing unfamiliarity with concepts such as sin, salvation, gospel and the like, as well as our offense at notions of exclusivity is itself indicative of influence of the forces of modernity discussed throughout this study.

The Problem of Commitment

Elizabeth Worthington, an actress in her 50s, grew up outside of the church in a "staunch" New England family. "We were cultural Christians," she said, as we sat drinking tea in her Upper West Side apartment. "We were really agnostic – respectful but

not practicing. I was not baptized, not going to church and rather proud of it," she said. Noting the independent and autonomous spirit with which she grew up, "I thought my Christian friends were sissies and superstitious, and that all that church stuff was for pathetic, unoriginal, dull and socially inept folks who didn't have enough gumption to think for themselves."

Like others of her generation, Elizabeth came to believe that Christianity simply wasn't true, because it didn't square with the life of educated people who ought to know better. Her relation and proximity to the cultural forces of modernity gave her unbelief a characteristic modern shape. The Bible disturbed her, but not because of some deep sense that it might actually be true. Rather, the Bible's claim to truth itself was out of place among the "educated" – people who "ought to know better." Increased pluralization and the corresponding subtext of inclusivity, has not led to "the absence of morality, but rather the emptying of meaning and significance and authority from the morality that is advocated."[187] Concepts like "obedience, sin and God's judgment" had no place in Elizabeth's vocabulary; morality was a private matter – it was not anchored in any over-arching or authoritative narrative. If God existed, she explained, he was at least loving and would overlook faults, sin and the like. But Elizabeth was rather confident he didn't exist. In her own words, she "knew better."

Yet, Elizabeth's confidence was soon shaken. She married in her early 20s and had a child, but the marriage failed soon after. It was then that she moved to New York to pursue a career as a singer. Her life became, in her own words, "troubled" – married and divorced twice, with a string of other "disastrous relationships." Life was hard and painful, she confessed. In the context of these "disasters" Elizabeth began to try-on various "spiritual" approaches to life – as "alternative means of coping." She was looking for relief to her troubles, not truths or answers in the grand sense. Her interests were pragmatic. She tried *Est*, transcendental meditation, Tibetan Buddhism, Krishnamurti,

[187] James Hunter. *The Death of Character*, 213.

crystals, Rebirthing, psychics, Marianne Williamson's *A Course on Miracles*, various other spiritualities and 12-step programs in order to ease the pain of her life and heal the brokenness.

Characteristically therapeutic, Elizabeth sampled most any "spiritual" path that seemed promising. The spiritual economy of New York included a host of options. The religious world was *a' la carte.* In a postmodern fashion, she was "playing with the forms"– utilizing those things that seemed most useful at the moment and discarding those things that had lost their utility. But it wasn't all "play" for Elizabeth – she had real troubles and she wanted a solution – a solution she certainly hoped existed somewhere.

It is not surprising at all that she "tried" Christianity – it is surprising that nearly a decade later she has remained. Always the individualist, utilitarian in her early years, more expressive in her latter years, Elizabeth approached religious communities as a consumer in search of that which would "work." Commitments made could be abandoned when the costs outwayed the benefits or when something more promising came along.

Religious congregations are deeply affected by the realities of ascendant therapeutic culture. Seats on Sunday morning are filled with people like Elizabeth Worthington. Even church-goers have come to embody the culture in which they live – their taken-for-granted world in many ways has less to do with transcendence than with themselves. Their allegiance to their faith is likely more because it seems to be "working for them," than because it is true. Even those who believe deeply, Wolfe argues, increasingly keep their religion to themselves – they possess a "quiet faith." Congregations are filled with people like Elizabeth Worthington. These are the people religious institutions must "treat" with their promises of salvation.

Rieff has argued that as the therapeutic ethos triumphed community died. Salvation, in the older sense of the word is impossible in a therapeutic world. This is not to say that religious congregations cease to exist or even to say that individuals stop participating and joining up. Congregational life clearly persist. Rather, as Bellah argues,

the therapeutic becomes so ingrained in the way modern people think and act that community itself becomes something different than before. Congregations are transformed. They become hunting grounds for meeting individual needs and wants. In Elizabeth's case, her spiritual quests were bound up with self-interest, focused on easing her troubles and finding personal happiness. Her decision to visit Redeemer was essentially no different than her previous attempts at self-help.

Rather than participant membership within community through commitment, the benefits of community and the "members" assessment of his or her needs in relation to promised benefits becomes central. Religion is commodified and with its commodification, community is weakened. The binding address of communities is diminished by the contractual arrangements characteristic of therapeutic culture. Elizabeth might find her way into a church, but she might just as soon leave as well.

In such a climate, against such odds and with such people, Redeemer's leadership has sought to build a congregation – a community – in Manhattan. Their strategy from the beginning focused on "recovering" the message of the historic gospel – the gospel obscured by both liberal and conservative churches. Redeemer's message, as we saw in the last chapter, is a resistant message – it is characteristically a traditional message. As such it may well bridge the gap between past and present, retaining themes of transcendence, sin and judgment while avoiding substantive accommodations. The challenge, of course, is not mere fidelity to one's tradition in terms of the message, but the challenge of "saving" a people who are more likely to consume religious products than be transformed by them.

The influence of pluralism, privatization and rationalization are especially focused in the therapeutic approach to life. The downside of such an approach, Bellah observes, "is that too much of the purely contractual structure of the economic and bureaucratic world is becoming an ideological model for personal life."[188] For example, the

[188] Bellah et. al. *Habits of the Heart*, 12

therapeutic self lives a managed life through cost-benefit calculations of all relationships and commitments. Cultural pluralism undermines particular claims to authority and truth. Morality has less to do with objective truths and standards than subjective preferences and needs. The guiding question for therapeutics rooted in rationalization is, "Does this work for me now?" The contractual life entails the freedom to cut off unproductive commitments and retain productive ones. At the center of such evaluation is the choosing and consuming self. The once taken-for-granted world is continually re-negotiated as the rationalistic themes and values of the market place enter and redefine the most basic and personal human relationships. Nothing is sacred. Nothing is exempt from its influence.

The self is socially situated – it is constructed through interaction with cultural narratives. Characterizations of the modern self, Viktor Gecas notes, are centered in themes of alienation, fragmentation, ambivalence, malleability and mutability.[189] The modern age brings questions of authenticity to light while at the same time rendering authenticity problematic. As Berger has said, the modern self is "homeless." Ralph Turner identifies "institution" and "impulse" as two principal vocabularies in which the self is anchored.[190] The times are changing, Turner argued, and the self once anchored in institutional narratives of identity is increasingly lodged in impulsive narratives of identity.

Bellah and his colleagues write of the shifting locus of the self in terms of the emergence of expressive individualism. Its rise coincides with and is rooted in the influences of therapeutic culture. Expressive individualism, like Turner's "impulsive self," is characterized by detachment from institutional commitments. Rather than constructing the self through institutional narratives that emphasize duty, morality and

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[189] Viktor Gecas. "In Search of the Real Self: Problems of Authenticity in Modern Times," in *Contemporary Studies in Sociology* (Volume 12, 1994:139 – 154), 144.
[190] Ralph H. Turner. "The Real Self: From Institution to Impulse." *American Journal of Sociology* (Volume 46:171-184).

achievement within prescribed institutional culture (work, family, church, civic responsibilities), the expressive self is built from desire and impulse alone, specifically from its expression or fulfillment.

The shift is well documented. Bellah, Turner and Reiff all suggest that the emergence of expressive individualism, the impulsive self or psychological man represents a significant cultural shift that carries significant social ramifications. Explaining the crisis is complex. James Dowd suggests the modern crisis of the self is much greater than the problem of "an institutionalized self that is now riddled by impulse" – it is, rather, "a crisis of a self once rooted in real human groups now radically transformed through exposure to television and other media of mass communication."[191] The rise of global capitalism, technologies and mass media erode the older communal forms in which the self was formed and sustained. Hunter similarly notes,

> The demands of multinational capitalism . . . have created conditions that make a coherent self that unites history, community, and subjectivity all but impossible. Pluralism and social mobility undermine the plausibility and coherence of personal beliefs and their capacity to provide a stable sense of meaning. A steady diet of the contemporary communications media and popular culture undermines our very sense of what is real.[192]

In short, community in the older sense of the word – community replete with abiding commitments, face to face interactions and creeds that anchor the self in a stable reality – is increasingly hard to come by.

Redeemer, like other religious congregations, is not exempt from the problems of commitment and of self. Communities, where they exist, are not insulated from the onslaught of global capitalism, technology, mass communications and popular culture. Indeed, Redeemer, in many respects, is situated in the thick of such realities. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of those who attend Redeemer do not "belong" in the

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[191] James Dowd. "Social Psychology in a Postmodern Age: A Discipline Without a Subject." *The American Sociologist* (Fall/Winter: 188-209), .199.
[192] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, xiv.

traditional sense – they attend, and do so with great regularity (nearly 78% attend at least 3 times per month), but membership is a more difficult commitment.

For Mac Aldin, that commitment was a slow process. Mac moved to New York in the early 1990s in order to work as an accountant, and in his words "to make it." From Mac's present commitment to and involvement in Redeemer, you wouldn't know or suspect that commitment was slow. On Sundays he volunteers as a children's Sunday school teacher and he leads a small-group Bible study during the week. Unlike Elizabeth Worthington, Mac grew up in the church. His parents were members of a Charismatic congregation in a large northeastern city. But Mac didn't stay put.

He admits, "I began to pull away from the church," after college, disillusioned with the church of his youth. "I hadn't always felt this way," he recounted: "At one time, I had thought seriously of becoming a minister." Indeed, Mac had been the model church member – in terms of church attendance, witnessing, Bible study and volunteerism, but all that was changing. Mac's distrust and disillusionment with the institutional church reflects the kind of cultural shift articulated by Turner. The institutional commitments that had sustained him through youth were losing their grip – the church increasingly seemed disconnected with the real world – inauthentic – an unreliable guide for life. Its rules and regulations suddenly seemed more restrictive than liberating.

Mac's world had changed. After college and beginning a new career as an accountant, temptations once manageable became unmanageable, and though Mac looked to the church for help, he found little in the way of understanding or help. The moral convictions that once held sway even in the midst of temptation were weaker, and the very institution in which those convictions were nurtured and sustained seemed "out-of-touch" with Mac's world. But Mac's world was different from the one in which he was raised – he attended college, he left home, started a career. It was then that he began

to characterize the church's message as a message of "condemnation" that filled him with "judgement and guilt."

Mac recalled going to visit his pastor and telling him about his difficulties. The pastor listened, Mac recalled, and "wrote down a prescription" for Mac's continued fellowship in the church. The problem, he was told, was his involvement in the world. Advancement in the Christian life would only come through detachment. The world's pull was too strong and if Mac wanted to get on in his life he would need to pull away a bit more. "Christians will not listen to secular music; they will not go to the movies; they will not drink – no television," he was told. Mac, however, was unwilling to give those very things up. He had, he admitted, become very dependent on television. Mac said that he worked alone for long hours out of his home, and that he needed television as a diversion – background noise. He could not give it up. It wasn't long after that Mac left the church. The church had become an insufficient guide for the life he wanted to live.

Having let God down, or at least the church, Mac moved away from an institutional form of identity toward a more expressive anchorage of the self. "I had a long string of sexual relationships," he confided. But Mac still felt "guilty and depressed." The shift from institution to impulse wasn't complete for Mac. His life became more a mixture of institution and impulse than pure impulse. Institutional obligations lingered in his life. The rules and sense of duty from his religious life remained a persistent voice in the midst of his more remissive lifestyle. The guilt and depression, however didn't lead him back into the church. Returning wasn't an option, he said – his sense of moral failure along with his memories of the the church's teaching left him believing there was no longer a place for someone like him in the church. Mac remained a deeply religious person – a failure at his religion, in many ways blatantly so, but religious nonetheless.

Mac, in many ways seems so different from Elizabeth Worthington – her pronounced unbelief, his pronounced belief. But the two are as much alike as they are

different. Elizabeth wanted nothing to do with the Christianity – she knew better. Even in her emerging spiritual quests she resisted notions of authority and obligation. She stood at the center of her life – directing, choosing and avoiding God. Mac, however, was a believer. As his experience of the life outside of the church grew – so did his discontent. In many ways, his departure from the church exemplifies the kinds of changes Hunter documented in his early study of evangelicals. The message of the church lost its influence and Mac, like Elizabeth, became central. In therapeutic fashion, he began to discard those commitments that no longer "worked" for him. Participant membership within the church community suddenly seemed out of reach and undesirable.

Consider Whit Cason, a fashion consultant in his late 40s. His family background was a bit more dysfunctional than either Mac or Elizabeth's. "I grew up detached," he said, with a "doting mother and an absent father." Whit, unlike Elizabeth, had some experience with the church, but unlike Mac, he was not consistently involved. He recalls making some kind of a commitment to Christianity at age 10, but is not sure if it was real or just emotion. Whatever the meaning of that early commitment – his life bore little resemblance to the commitment until recently.

Tim Keller estimates that as many as one in four of the men attending Redeemer have had some personal exposure and experience with homosexuality. Whit Cason is one of those men. His first gay experience was with a 10th-grade science teacher. "It was probably inevitable," Whit said, "inevitable, in the sense that I had a tremendous longing for affection from a man."

The encounter between Whit and his teacher became the single greatest barrier between Whit and the Church. "I could no longer approach God," he said. "I gave one of my famous ultimatums. I said, 'God, show yourself if you are really here. If you could do it for someone in the Old Testament, you could do it now.'" Well, God didn't show up that night, at least not in any way that Whit could identify. Whit gave up on God.

Turning away from the possibility of knowing God and certainly of committing to a church Whit said, “I chose a path and I stayed on the path for many years.” That path was a path of sexual release. “Those moments of feeling alive for me became homosexual. Those were the only times I felt alive,” he recalled. As he put it, there were “numerous liaisons.” Authenticity, at this point in Whit’s life, was rooted in the expression of desire.

Institution and impulse are rarely discrete narratives – rather they flow into and out of one another. In reality, the self is riddled with the tension between institutional obligations and desire. In Whit’s life, the tension between institution and impulse is apparent from an early age. At age 10 he contemplated “giving himself to the Lord,” and in some sense he committed himself. He attended church sporadically, but had some sense that God was real – that there were obligations. At 14 his emotional and sexual desires gained ascendancy in the context of abuse, but even in the midst of his sexual expression Whit wasn’t successful in escaping a sense of obligation. Whit, just like Elizabeth, describes his life as difficult and dysfunctional. And, like Elizabeth, he sought solutions. Solutions for Whit, however, had very little to do with “spiritual” quests and “alternative” spiritualities. Whit’s life teeter-totters between institutional and impulsive anchorages of the self.

The Vietnam War was the occasion of change yet again. Whit set aside his sexually promiscuous life and became, in his words, a “good soldier.” “I proved to myself that I could be as good a man as anyone else,” he said. The life of the good soldier became a new way of crafting himself, of authenticity, even as sexual expression had been the previous way of “feeling alive.” His sense of self and identity was fluid. Whit’s real self, if we can speak of it, was neither institutional nor impulsive – it was, like Elizabeth and Mac’s, characteristically therapeutic – Whit tried whatever framework seemed most promising.

Following the war, he returned home only to find that very little had changed. There were no receptions, no fan fairs, no rewards for the "good soldier" and no newness in his family relationships – life as usual. And Whit changed course yet again. He moved to New York where he began working in the fashion industry. He returned to the path of "hedonism" and sexual expression – still homosexual in character. "I had a long string of lovers," he admitted, finally having his last lover at age 36. "I idealized him," he recounted, "and spent the next six years watching the relationship go from being idealized to pathetic." Both Whit and his lover were professionally and financially successful. They enjoyed an apartment in New York, a house in the Hamptons, sail boats and travel. Whatever they wanted they were able to get for the most part. According to Whit, life was "bearable."

Elizabeth, Mac and Whit, like others in the congregation of Redeemer, live ambivalent lives – no one narrative provides a consistent grounding for the self. The common thread between them is more the therapeutic notion of authority, independence and choice than anything else. The leaders of Redeemer recognize the dilemmas of the self. There are two kind of unbelief, Keller says, that of the religious and the irreligious. The categories used to address members and attenders are strikingly similar to the types introduced by Turner and Bellah. The religious are institutional in character, defining themselves through duty and obligation. Religious people are at their best when they are living up to some standard – either God's or one of their own making, and at their lowest when they have violated the standards. They have a high regard for that which is "right." In contrast, irreligious types are less interested in notions of law and duty. Rather, another principle guides them through life – that of "expression" and "impulse." Theirs is a life of release from the restraints of religious culture. Life for the irreligious is anchored in desire, experience and expression.

The irreligious and the religious are not discrete types; they are a heuristic – analytically useful ways of thinking about the people who make up the congregation. And

according to the leadership of Redeemer, they are as much alike as they are different. Both habits of the heart, we might say, are ways of avoiding and approaching God. Redeemer's pastors regularly point out that religious types avoid God as much as anyone else. Keller asserts that the gospel is for the religious and the irreligious alike. The gospel preached at Redeemer is not exclusively duty, nor is it exclusively impulse. Rather, Redeemer's gospel joins duty and impulse.

Worship & Community Amidst the Ruins

Redeemer's strategy for building the congregation in Manhattan is undeniably message driven. That message, the leaders argue, is the key to lasting change for people like, Elizabeth, Mac and Whit. The message is stated and restated on many fronts – small groups, leadership gatherings, worship services, sermons and retreats. Though Redeemer consciously emphasizes participation in small-group Bible studies that meet throughout the week, here too, the message remains central. So that the message might not be lost in the sea of individual opinion, groups use Bible studies prepared by the pastors of the church as the basis for their teaching. Leaders are supplied with study guides complete with running comments on the biblical text, questions to ask of the text, along with answers. The message is not a matter of individual taste or interpretation – it is God's message, and worshipers are not free to interpret as they wish. This practice is an obvious means of preserving the message – it is quality control. But more importantly, sociologically speaking, by restricting interpretation of the message, church leaders have symbolically de-centered the consuming self resisting the forces of pluralization, privatization and rationalization.

The message is important to church leadership, and its prominence does not go unnoticed by attendants. "The teaching is the best, encouraging, practical and challenging," a worshiper told me. Another said, "sermons are the hook that make you stay." The message is prominent and though a rather traditional message it is a message that connects with those who attend.

The gospel, as it is articulated at Redeemer has given Mac Aldin a new hope in the church. “I came for the sermons,” he said of his first months at Redeemer. He describes Keller as having an “ability to relate the gospel” unlike anyone he had ever heard before. The church he had been involved with as a child had lost touch with the “real world,” and that as much as anything else prompted Mac’s departure. In contrast, Mac notes, that “anyone could drop into Redeemer from anywhere intellectually or spiritually, and feel challenged on an intellectual level about truth.” In every message, he noted, “there is an opportunity for believers to grow and for unbelievers to be challenged.” The Bible, he said, “is connected with what is going on in the city.”

“The first Sunday I came,” Mac recounted, “Dr. Keller spoke about grace in his sermon.” Though growing up in the church, the concept was new to Mac. “I had never in my entire life heard anyone talk about grace,” he said. Mac’s earlier church experience exposed him to “the kind of Christianity that [taught] I had better not screw up. And if I did screw up, I would have to go back down the rungs, to rung ‘a,’ because there is some kind of sin there. I have to resolve it and then go on to step ‘b.’” “How is it,” Mac began to ask after attending Redeemer for a few months, “that I can come to church and not feel excluded?” From the first visit, Mac understood that Redeemer’s message was unlike the message with which he had grown up. He says of his life, “I was functioning without a real understanding of grace, and over the last four years everything has come together in a cohesive unit.”

The aspect of Redeemer’s message that particularly caught Mac’s attention was the emphasis that, in Mac’s words, “we can be forgiven of our sins if we come to Christ as we are. We don’t have to do anything, or be anything – we can come from wherever we have been, and God is a loving God who wants to forgive our sins. Grace has been extended to us through Christ for our forgiveness.”

It would be simplistic to conclude from Mac’s commentary on the message of Redeemer that it has accommodated the prevailing forces of pluralism, privatization and

rationalization to emphasize the positive side of God's love at the expense of his wrath. Mac was quick to point out, even as he made his point about forgiveness, that "Redeemer is not light on holiness."

That comment is echoed in Elizabeth Worthington's first experiences at Redeemer. Elizabeth's opposition to Christianity was rooted in questions of authority. She thought of Christians as weak-minded, anti-intellectual "sissies." At Redeemer she found Keller's "style and intellect captivating and convincing." Oddly enough, she points to *A Course in Miracles* as providing a decisive shift in her journey toward Christianity. "In the years of listening to Marianne Williamson lecture on *A Course in Miracles*," she said, "my resistance to Christian terminology was lessened. But I was still glad that her theories about God and Christ didn't impede my personal lifestyle very much." The course required little or nothing of Elizabeth in the way of obedience. Authority, if it existed at all, remained personal and individually focused.

Elizabeth was a religious consumer, and that hadn't changed when she decided to visit Redeemer. Her visit was initially driven by another interest and desire for a relationship with a man who attended Redeemer. She went as much because of personal attraction to the friend who had invited her as anything else. "It took a while for me to discover," she admits, "that I was coming to church because I was seeking God more than I was seeking the man who had originally brought me. I was not a believer but began to take a few steps down this Christian path to see what would happen." Her steps included attending the weekly worship services with regularity, getting the counsel of pastors about her life and involvement in a Bible Study that one of the pastors led in their home.

"I realized," she told me, that Redeemer "was a born-again church, but I went back and began to listen. I was excited by his [Keller's] style and intellect." As with the others, the message of the church caught her attention. "On hearing Tim I was struck by the fact that this intelligent, rational, seemingly very modern, urbane man could talk this

way about obedience, sin, God's judgment, and, of course, Christ. He seemed to believe in the sorts of things I had negatively associated with those dull and gullible Christians of my youth. He seemed to make so much sense."

The authoritative dimensions of Redeemer's message took root first. The very dimension of Christianity that she had so recently abhorred now stirred her imagination. "I was coming to deeply respect [Keller]," she explained, "because he put the hard-ball facts of Christianity out there with this radical challenge to come and commit myself to live by God's commands. And he wasn't the slightest bit embarrassed to be speaking this way." Over time, she says, "the words of the Bible began to make sense to me. And I felt God's personal work with me in my daily life." Unlike previous spiritual experiences, the message of Christianity required something of her – it required changes.

Elizabeth's struggle wasn't first of all with guilt or transgression – in the absence of authority there is no such thing. Therapeutic culture erases obligation and so mitigates the very notion of sin. It's not an "issue." Elizabeth's struggle was not unique. It is owned by everyone who dwells in the therapeutic culture. Yet, the messages she heard at Redeemer emphasized God's commands, his law, duty and obligation.

The required changes for Elizabeth's life were momentous. They included, she confessed with tears in her eyes, giving up a relationship with a man that had gone too far for too long. "Marriage is a covenant," she told me, tears streaming down her cheeks as she explained that marriage is a monogamous relationship between a man and a woman. "Violating the covenant was killing me, and I had thought I could get away with it." Elizabeth, for whom avoiding the implications of authority had been a way of life, was beginning to believe there was something to God's ways. The man she had been seeing wasn't willing to give, in her words, "the commitment that went with the expression," and so she ended the relationship. Her tears spoke volumes of their painful good-bye. "I loved him," she said, but "he doesn't – it's painful." The good-bye was a tremendous step of belief. Unlike *A Course in Miracles*, which made few if any demands of

Elizabeth, she had come to believe that Christianity, "was hard ball. And if you want to play – live it or go." Elizabeth decided to play, and for the first time she didn't move on to the next "alternative" – she was deciding to commit even in the face of the deeply personal demands of Christianity.

Liturgical Responses

The principle space in which Mac, Elizabeth, Whit and the many others who attend Redeemer encounter the message of the gospel is in public worship. For a moment we will leave Elizabeth, Mac and Whit in order to consider the message as it is enacted in Redeemer's worship. Church leaders estimate that as many as 50 percent of those in attendance are not Christians. Whatever the actual percentage, a visitor's first exposure to the message of Redeemer is often through one of the three Sunday worship services. Public worship is historically the centerpiece of religious experience – the word is read, the sermon given, offerings received, hymns and prayers are offered, the sacraments are administered and friendships nurtured.

The Christian church historically is centered around word and sacrament centered in the church's public worship. God's words confront listeners with an articulation of reality that is authoritative – Christianity is centered in a metanarrative that is meant to make sense of and adjudicate between all dimensions of life. Once a week the congregation assembles together for worship. And though this gathering occurs on Sunday morning or evening, worship is a model for the whole of life. "Worship," as one member described it, "is a norming experience." He explained that the worship re-ordered his world. "Six days we labor in the world," another worshiper explained, "on the first day of the week, Sunday, we gather to regain our focus." Weekly, worshipers are challenged to "come under" the teaching and authority of God's Word – to let it "norm" their hearts and lives, to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ afresh, and to embody their commitment within the world they inhabit the remaining six days of the week.

Durkheim shows us that religion is deeply social. "Religious representations," he writes, "are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups."[193] The church's gatherings and particularly its worship are indispensable to the religious life. For it is in the context of the group that a world is created and sustained. Worship is the context in which the habits of the heart are formed and nurtured – it is a metaphor for the life that the worshiper is called to live at all times everywhere. Worship, we might say, is good to think with. It enables participants to think about reality in a way that they would not otherwise think.

Sometimes the ritual of worship has what Schudson refers to as high-resolution – that is, it is explicitly prescriptive – but more often worship has a low-resolution, enabling participants to think about their world and life in particular ways.[194] The interpretive authority of worship resides in successful keying to the transcendent.[195] In such cases worship links the transcendent realities of God and kingdom with the everyday lives of the worshiper. Instead of fragmentary, relativistic pluralism, in which each opinion is confused with other opinions of equal status, worship insists on there being one truth, one way of looking at the world, indeed one way of living in the world.

The liturgy of worship at Redeemer revolves around hearing and responding to God. God is holy, the worshiper a sinner and so there is public confession of sin as worshipers recite a prayer of confession together. Not only is sin spoken of from the pulpit, it figures prominently into the liturgy itself. There are boundaries separating the sacred and profane. There is a moral order that worshipers are called upon to respond to. They confess sins acknowledging violation of boundaries. There is absolution of sin – an

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[193] Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 22.
[194] Micheal Schudson, "How Culture Works: Perspectives from Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols," *Theory and Society* (Volume 18, 1989: 153-180), 174.
[195] Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, (Basic Books: N.Y., 1983), 124.

assurance of forgiveness to the repentant. The worship leader reads passages of scripture that speak of pardon and forgiveness. The congregation sits, stands, prays and sings hymns of celebration. The larger portion of the worship is given centrally to the reading of a passage from the Bible and a sermon that follows. Again, worshipers are urged to respond in belief rather than unbelief.

And though this activity of worship takes place for one hour and fifteen minutes a week – it is meant to carry the worshiper through the week. The congregation is urged to "draw lines from the gospel into their lives," to "embody the Word," to "put flesh on the Word" and "to go forth to serve the world." Sunday morning is meant to shape and form the other six days of the week. Worship in this sense becomes a metaphor for living. As Shils said in reference to the Elizabethan coronation, "The Heart has its reasons which the mind does not suspect."[196] Worship as ritual is the space in which and the activity by which the reasons of the heart are constructed.

It is not surprising that worship has become such a contested terrain within American evangelicalism. Seeker churches have sought a radical change in terms of the cultural idiom of the market place, if not the theater. Reduced involvement by worshipers, an entertainment mode and sermons that resemble the modern "how-to" book are some of the characteristics of such accommodation. As pluralization, privatization and rationalization come to define the sacred space of worship, the world created and the habits of the heart constructed through such worship, erodes distinction between church and culture. Redeemer is a contrast to these adaptations. Though the congregation assembles in a college auditorium, Redeemer's leadership has sought obvious and explicit connections with the Christian past. Old hymns, classical or jazz music and prayers that could have been prayed by an older generation flood the auditorium on Sundays.

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[196] Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Ill.1975), 135.

There are two moments of high resolution in which belief and unbelief are vividly dramatized in Redeemer's worship – the practice of the two sacraments of baptism and communion. They are visual and physical depictions of the Christian world or reality. Both speak of the participant's inclusion among "the people of God." Baptism is a once-in-a-life sacrament in which, at Redeemer, water is poured or sprinkled upon the head of believing adults and their children. It announces one's reception within the community by means of a public washing. Communion, like baptism, points to a person's welcome and reception into the family of God. But unlike baptism, communion is celebrated monthly during Redeemer's worship services. The communion becomes, for participants, a time of visual reflection on the life and death of Jesus Christ, a time of remembering the message of the gospel and affirming one's continued allegiance to Christ.

Baptism

On a Sunday morning December 1994, 17 people moved from their seats in the auditorium to the stage at the front of the auditorium. They were coming to the front of the assembled crowd to publicly vow membership in Redeemer – some were to be baptized. "Baptism," the bulletin explained, "is a sign which God places upon his people which communicates that they are partakers of the privileges and responsibilities of the covenant he has made. . . . Through baptism God says to us, 'As surely as water washes dirt from the body, if you have put your trust in the sin-bearing death of my Son, Jesus, be assured that his blood and his Spirit wash away all your sins.'"

As they stood together in a semi-circle on the platform Keller addressed them along with the congregation. There visual presence that morning was itself a message to the congregation. "God is a covenant-making God," Keller told them, "and he wants us – even as he has committed himself to us to the point of death – to commit ourselves to him. Our culture tells you that if you commit yourself, you become less human. But God is a God of commitment, and the more we commit, the more we become like him – the

more human we become. Imagine Moses coming to the Lord and saying, 'I want to see your glory. I want intimacy, but I don't want exclusive commitment; I want to keep my options open.' Of course you can't imagine that – you can never ask for intimacy with God without commitment."

Keller's comments highlight his awareness and the awareness of his audience that what these 17 people were doing that morning in taking membership vows and receiving baptism was "culturally" unusual. Commitment is problematic in modernity. In contrast, the 17 become a public and visible message of that which is normal for the Christian – a life of commitment to God and to one another. The group standing at the front that morning vowed that they saw themselves to be sinners in need of a savior, they vowed an exclusive belief in Jesus Christ as savior, they committed themselves to follow him, and they vowed submission to the church.

After the vows, Keller led in prayer before baptizing each of those not previously baptized. To baptize them, he took water in his hand from a bowl and poured it over the head of the recipient and baptized them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. He led in prayer again at the conclusion of the ceremony, and as the people took their seats the entire congregation stood up and greeted one another.

Baptism unites and divides the congregation of Redeemer. Redeemer's practice of baptism is not unlike that of other Protestant churches. The water, the liturgy and ritual look similar to that of other churches. The distinction and difference stems from the way the teaching of the church frames its use and meaning. Like the broader context of worship baptism is a ritual that confronts the assembled with a way of viewing world and life – their lives. There is unity and celebration for the baptized who are connected to one another in commitment and membership. Where other churches may assume the rite of baptism, no such assumptions are made at Redeemer – the ritual divides as much as it joins. Baptism is for the committed. Though no children were baptized on this particular morning – they too are included along with parents in the community.

Baptism divides, if only in the mind of the attendants who have and have not committed publicly to become followers of Christ and members of Redeemer Church. Baptism is a rite of passage to full communion in the church. Only the baptized are invited to participate in the sacrament of communion. It is a washing that marks its recipient as one of the faithful – one who has crossed the divide from unbelief to belief. Its practice and its inclusion within the public worship excludes.

Communion

"This Christmas, remember all that the Father did to get close to you," Keller told a group of 100 or so leaders gathered for the December leadership meeting. The message of Advent was everywhere in December 1994. Themes of nearness, closeness, care and love permeated messages and conversations. During the December 4th service, the worship leader invited gathered worshipers to "come near God." The sermon that morning, "God With Us in Our Suffering," concluded with an invitation to the Sacrament of Communion.

The sacrament is offered once a month during Redeemer's worship services. And like baptism, Redeemer's practice of communion is shaped by the creeds of the church. Communion has meaning, and its meaning is rooted in the message of the church and the commitment Christian orthodoxy demands. Commuion unifies and divides. There are rules of participation: not everyone is welcome at the table. There is exclusivity. Only those who have made a public commitment to Jesus Christ either at Redeemer or at another church are invited to participate. Communion separates people out, it draws distinctions that are otherwise down-played within the broader pluralistic culture.

The congregation prepared for the communion as Keller led them in a prayer of access. "Focusing your eyes on Jesus know what you are doing," he said before reading the Apostle Paul's account of the communion from first Corinthians, Chapter 11. He picked up the bread and broke it, reminding them of the broken body of Christ. He held up the cup, reminding them of the "new covenant" in the blood of Christ, adding, "If

you are willing to see Jesus as *arkegos*,[197] not just an example, this is for you. If you consider yourself to be religious, this is not for you unless you are willing to believe on Christ forsaking your sin." Keller reminded the congregation that the division between belief and unbelief is not between the religious and the irreligious – but between those who have come to see themselves as sinners in need of Christ and those who have not.

The servers, both men and women, came forward to distribute the bread and cup throughout the congregation. The bread was served first – trays of small loaf-like pieces passed around throughout the congregation – those participating took a piece and held it – they would eat together. The communion is a public ritual – the congregation of believers communions together.

"Do you really believe you come before a God who will meet you because of what he has done?" Keller asked before the group ate. "Let us meet him. Let us eat." Those communing ate. The choir and the congregation sang, "I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved and free." The cup was then distributed as the choir sang, "Jesus is our King." The congregation joined in on the refrain. Plastic cups of grape juice were then distributed and held in hand until those communing were served. Keller lifted the cup, saying, "On the cross he opened his heart, and what was poured in was the shame and guilt. When you open your hearts to him, he pours in his love. What he has done for us destroys self pity." Together, everyone drank.

The communion is physical and tangible. Believers touch, taste and ingest the bread and juice. As with the sacrament of baptism, the sacrament visibly divides the congregation between believer and non-believer. The words of institution and of exhortation that accompany the distribution of the bread and the cup, and shape the participant's understanding of participation. Participants must recognize those things God has done to get near his people – to enable "sinful" people to come near – to "sit"

[197] This Greek word was the subject of the morning sermon. Keller used it to speak of Jesus as the one who has opened the way to God the Father through his own life and death.

around his table. They must confess their belief in their sinfulness and God's provision for their acceptance through the death of Christ. They must remember that "they are more sinful than they dare admit, and more loved than they dare hope." Not everyone communes, however, but even the non-communing attendant is invited to a similar confession and remembrance of "all that God has done to get close." Keller invites them to similarly "draw near to God."

Baptism and communion, like the worship in general, are good to think with. These rituals, however, are not unique to Redeemer. They have been an aspect of the church's practice and ritual since its beginning. If they are different from the practice within other churches, the difference stems from the way in which the message of Redeemer defines and frames their practice and their meaning. Baptism and communion are visible signs of Redeemer's message and urge attendants to live lives of commitment and surrender to an authority other than themselves. They thus, become defining rituals that create and sustain the world in a way that it would not otherwise be in the hearts and minds of the participants.

Community: "I belong"

Worship "norms" you, the worshiper said to me. It shapes the way participants think about their life and world. One day in seven Redeemer gathers as a community of worshipers around word and sacrament and it is meant to establish, nurture and sustain the community in the midst of an alien world.

"Norming," however, is far from simple. A strategy of message is not enough to sustain faith. In a pluralistic society there are competing messages and rituals of participation. Redeemer's message is not the only message in town – it's not the only message heard by those who attend. Technology, mass marketing and mass communication sustain a cacophony of alternative messages and images before the watching and consuming self. By the time an attendant or member steps onto the street he is assaulted by competing visions of the moral order and the revelations of the last

hour are challenged. "Mondays have always been hard," Mac told as we sat eating lunch following the morning service. "You are coming off of the thrill of Sunday," he said, "only to go home." His comment is all too telling for those who seek to live their faith in the pluralistic world – faith, no matter how desirable, remains difficult.

Yet, Mac belongs. He is committed. He has found a way to sustain faith in the midst of his world replete with competing messages, temptation and failure. Mac draws comfort from the fact that he is not alone. There are others who struggle, and there are opportunities to meet with other Christians for prayer and Bible study during the week. These smaller gatherings of Christians, as much as the more public teaching of the pastors, according to Mac, are "tools for dealing with the reality of things."

Mac characterizes Redeemer as a church that deals with the real struggles of real people in a world characterized by pain and brokenness. The pastors, the religious professionals of Redeemer are in touch with the real world of their congregation. "It would be really hard to shock Tim, Jeff or Scott with anything as far as what is happening in your life," Mac noted. He takes great comfort in the closeness of his pastors to his life. Though he is not personal friends with any of the pastors, he has a real sense that they understand – in marked contrast to his previous experience with church.

Rodney Stark, writing of the rise of early Christianity, notes that clergy were not "distanced from their flocks – they were not an initiated elite holding back arcane secrets, but teachers and friends, selected, as Tertullian explained, 'not by purchase, but by established character.'"[198] Keller and the other pastors are connected to the lives of the rank and file of Redeemer. They understand the issues and pressures of life in the city and they offer guidance to their congregation. They listen, they understand and they guide.

The barrier to commitment for Mac had been the discontinuity between the religious message he grew up hearing and the real struggles he had with living it. The

[198] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 207.

discontinuity, as much as his own failures and his increased exposure to the "world," precipitated his departure. The community lacked credibility. Redeemer recognizes the realities of such struggles – "tragedy is near us," one member observed, "people come in and celebrate, but they go back out into the storms of life." The face-to-face relationships within the community are a context in which tensions of secularization find resolution. The message of Redeemer seemingly has crossed the divide – between theory and practice – for people like Mac. In 1995 Mac stood in front of the congregation and took membership vows. He committed.

"I came to the city for me. I wanted to get ahead," Mac recalled. "At some point it's no longer enough to simply come to Redeemer and fill up on the teaching. If you want maturity, it means making yourself secondary. But coming to the city is not about, for most people, becoming secondary; it's about number one." Mac said he had to realize, and others who want to mature have to realize, that growth comes "when you make yourself second and you put yourself out – it's difficult." Committing to membership in the church, leading a small group, teaching children's Sunday school and building accountable friendships within the church are the paths through which Mac makes himself "second."

For Mac, Redeemer is a community, community characterized by honesty about who people are and what they struggle with – an honesty he had not previously known. Mac had learned through experience the difficulties of following Christ in the world, but his home church hadn't helped him understand the struggle or move through it. The rules were simply restated. People, Mac said, "are dealing openly with the truth of their lives." At Redeemer, "It's OK to say, 'I am a homosexual.' This is an environment of understanding. A long string of sexual relationships left Mac wondering "How can I possibly come to Christ after all this?" Redeemer has become a refuge for Mac and for others who struggle with sexual temptation – heterosexual or homosexual. "It is challenging," he says. "You can't say we don't want this kind of person in our church – it

is no different than someone who struggles with adultery." The fact that people are honest about their struggle to follow Christ has been a huge piece of the puzzle for Mac, an honesty he attributes to the message of the gospel. For Mac this "honest" interaction with others in the community is critical to his own commitments. As Neitz, Smith and Warner have shown, such face to face interaction is not only important, but central to sustaining faith in the modern age.

Like Mac, Elizabeth's commitment to Christianity took some time. "It took many months to believe that Christ had died for me and that he could have a specific personal effect in my life," she said, "But in November of 1994 I surprised myself by saying, yes." During my time at New York in the spring of 1995 I ran into Elizabeth downstairs following the worship service. She was a convert by that time, and waiting to stand before the congregation and take vows, be baptized, and join other believers in communion. Elizabeth was publicly baptized and received into the membership of Redeemer on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1995. She recalled the verses read at her baptism from First Thessalonians: "For we know, brothers loved of God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. They tell us how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."

It has been 6 years since Elizabeth's conversion. She told me then of her new interest in missions – she wanted to live in the city as a missionary. In 1996, she wrote me, saying, "My walk is lovely in the Lord. I have learned a lot and only just begun to grasp how much there is to learn about the gospel." Her commitments have led her into greater involvement in the leadership of the church. Elizabeth leads a leads a small-group Bible study, much like the one she first attended when she came to Redeemer. The group is "a real challenge and reminder that the Lord is in charge and I am not," she says. She

also meets with and assists other leaders with their groups. Elizabeth is not an official missionary of the church, but she actively engages the mission of the church in the city.

A couple of years ago she was considering a career change, leaving the theater symposium she has worked with for a number of years. But she was urged by members of her small group to view it as her mission field, and to stick with it. "I have deep inner peace," she recently confided, which she admitted, was absent when we had first talked in the winter of 1994. Elizabeth has rejected alternative "spiritualities;" she has stopped converting, and she attributes that to the "hard-ball" message she first heard at Redeemer six years ago – a message she now embraces as her own and a message she now takes to others.

Finally, Whit Cason, like Elizabeth and Mac came to a point of commitment. When his "bearable" life began to crumble he looked once again to the church. His father lay dying in the hospital, his lover had a stroke and he lost his job. "I decided to walk into a church," Whit said, recalling his sudden willingness to think of God again. "It was Good Friday, and I sat in the back pew of this Baptist church on Madison Avenue. I remember that the minister came back to say hello and I told him that if I had wanted to say hello to him I would have come to him, and to back off."

But Whit returned to the back pew of the Baptist church. "The sermons were almost banal: God loves you, God loves you, God loves you," according to Whit, but he assumed it was what he needed to hear. "It was not the gospel, evangelically speaking, but it was what a broken man needed to hear, because I couldn't believe that God could love me."

After awhile, Whit decided to move on and he left the Baptist church in search of something different. He tried an ex-gay ministry, because deep down he didn't want to be gay. "It wasn't a new feeling for me. People that I know are gay don't want to be, if you get down to the reality of it all." Then Whit met a man who went to Redeemer. "I

didn't really like this guy too well; he was a bit full of himself. Nonetheless, I thought I would go."

When Whit came to Redeemer and heard Keller speak for the first time, he recalls, "I knew the day I sat there that this is where I belong." Up until then, Whit's life was one long journey of looking for spirituality, looking for love, looking for peace, sometimes looking for God, but most of the time avoiding him. Whit said of that day, "I belong here and God spoke. He spoke through [Keller] to me." Whit looks back on his life and sees that all along he has been on a journey toward commitment. But at Redeemer commitment became solid. "The Lord and I still struggle," he told me in the spring of 1995, "with issues of control and the process of homosexuality." Whit said that he no longer practiced homosexuality, and only once since committing to the Lord has he become sexually involved with another man. Recalling that event Whit said, "I felt devastated, so sinful."

The teaching at Redeemer has helped Whit understand his life and his choices, and urges him toward a commitment to God. "The church is full of broken people," Whit observes, "Redeemer has been good for me. This morning when I walked out of the sermon, I thanked God for yet again encouraging me. I thank him for the gift of Tim, but more so for the body, the lives of my brothers and sisters." The personal interaction with others who "belong," others who have committed reinforce and sustain those commitments. Worship may norm the "believer" – but apart from community the challenges and difficulties are more likely to overwhelm the convert. The relationships sustain the vision of the world nurtured in worship the other six days of the week.

Summary

Worship is a norming experience where the religious and the irreligious realize the inadequacies of other cultural expressions of Christianity and are challenged to believe – to commit. Whit came to believe that he "belongs" at Redeemer because "God spoke to him in the sermon." Transcendence and authority resides not within himself,

but came to him from outside and required of him "submission." Elizabeth, too, found herself committing in very practical ways – giving up a "sinful" sexual relation with a man she loved but which was forbidden by the "hard-ball" Christianity presented at Redeemer. On the other hand, Mac found great relief from his failed religious life in the message of grace at Redeemer, and he found a place in which he could struggle alongside others and succeed in following Christ.

In an age in which evangelicals increasingly emphasize technique, style and method, Redeemer's ministry is centered on its traditional message and relationships within the community. The gospel, Keller says, is neither from the right nor the left; it is from above. Cultural style, as we noted in chapter three, was important to the founders of Redeemer. Accordingly, people mention Keller's laid-back style – less preachy and more talkative, like that of a lecturer. They mention the simple historic and classical worship of the morning service or the jazzy character of the evening worship, but always as secondary to the message itself. At Redeemer, attention to style is as much about reducing distractions from the message as anything else. It is a message church leaders believe and hope will captures people's lives, send them home at the end of the day and keep them living under the norms of the gospel tradition.

Still, many, perhaps most, of those attending Redeemer begin as consumers in search of religious goods. "I think a lot of people," one member commented, "come to our church just looking for a fix." He admitted that he also had come first of all looking for a fix. "Redeemer," he added, "is a church of healing." That "healing" for people like Elizabeth, Mac and Whit has meant moving beyond the logic of the market place – interest in what religion can do for them – toward substantive commitments and participation in the lives of those who comprise the community of Redeemer.

The message of Redeemer has become central to the lives of Mac, Elizabeth and Whit, but crossing the divide between unbelief and belief is about much more than adhering to a message they had previously "rejected." It is about community and the

face to face relationships that are nurtured within community. Mac found friends with whom he could struggle, and he is learning to "put himself second," as he says, and serve. Elizabeth from the beginning was involved in a small group with other believers. Today she leads one and oversees other leaders. Whit is thankful for Keller's messages, but most of all for his brothers and sisters – his fellow "broken servants," as he calls them. His commitment has taken a turn toward greater involvement as a minister helping others who struggle with similar sexual desires. The face to face interaction with others who believe and struggle make Mondays bearable and do-able. Worship norms you – but the relationships keep the process going as the congregation empties onto the streets of New York City.

Elizabeth, Mac and Whit are different than before – their lives are changing. The gospel changes people, the leadership and attendants maintain, but Redeemer's goal for change is not limited to the individuals who gather on Sunday morning – their vision is also for New York City itself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SCATTERED CHURCH: CHALLENGING PRIVATIZATION

Following the Sunday worship service the congregation empties into the city streets. Theories of privatization suggest that they will do very little with their faith as they depart. What works for the individual need not have any bearing beyond the individual. Pluralization, not only raises doubts about faith, it also squeezes faith into the private spheres of life. Privatization affects all dimensions of religious life – institutions speak to the "private" and individual issues and needs, and the individuals who participate in religious activities do so more and more on very individualistic terms. Religion has become and largely remains a private affair.

Redeemer's leadership, however, expresses a desire to break out of the box. "We do not want Christians to privatize their faith in a way that creates a chasm between their faith and their work, nor to express it in terms of a sub-culture," Keller writes in the church newsletter.[199] Instead, he urges Christians to labor within their "vocations with both excellence and Christian distinctiveness, thus transforming the culture in which we live, from the inside out." Redeemer, the gathered congregation is told, exists not merely for the private needs of its members, but to change the city in its totality.

The task is enormous, but the leadership keeps the goal of broad social and cultural change constantly before the congregation in sermons, newsletters, at congregational gatherings and in the worship services. One of the most obvious places that church leaders hold this commitment before the congregation is through the worship service itself. Before departing from the weekly gathering, attendants participate in the benediction and an exhortation to serve the city. Within the liturgy of the church the benediction is a pronouncement of blessing on the gathered people of God.

[199] Tim Keller, Redeemer Newsletter, April 1997.

Protestant worship, when it includes benediction, will often end there – with the statement of blessing. Not so at Redeemer – blessing flows into exhortation, almost a commandment. Week after week, the pastor leading worship concludes the service saying, "Now let us go forth to serve the world as those who love the Lord Jesus Christ," and each week the congregation responds, "Thanks be to God." This phrase is repeated Sunday after Sunday as the conclusion to corporate worship – the church gathered, constituted and blessed as the people of God is sent on a mission as it scatters into the city streets. As we saw in the last chapter, worship is good to think with. The liturgical elements of the worship service are meant to shape the way the congregation thinks. The church, the congregation is instructed, is a servant of Christ in the world; it is an agent of change. Christianity is about all of life, not just the private and personal dimensions.

Redeemer's public message is not a new message. Historically, Christians have maintained that all the world belongs to Jesus Christ. Societal change has always been a hope of the Church, if not an experienced reality. As we saw in chapter one, Christianity began at the margins of society. Its scope of influence was weak. By the time of Constantine's conversion, however, the Christian church had grown. Stark estimates that as much as 16 percent of the Greco-Roman population by the third century professed to be Christians.[200] From one perspective, Constantine simply joined the ranks, but the Church was politically established, gaining an ascendancy and power it had not previously known. Until the modern age, the established Church managed to keep its finger in the "secular" pie – its presence connected to the most menial of social, cultural and political tasks. The political union between Church and world diminished the division between sacred and secular. This newly inaugurated relationship between the sacred and secular realms was and continues to be the subject of great debate.

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[200] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton Press: Princeton, N.J.,1996), 13.

The union, however, was not permanent. As the medieval social order crumbled, it passed. In the modern age, the church was differentiated from non-religious dimensions of society. Secularization, in terms of differentiation, occurred and the established church faced, once again, the older challenges of disestablishment; the secular realms of life once again were out of bounds. Sometimes the division occurred reluctantly, and at other times peaceably. Differentiation between sacred and secular however it occurred has now become an historical reality.

Though the division between the sacred and the secular is now commonplace, the impact on religious institutions is less clear. The prevailing conclusion has been that religion is "privatized." Religion, in the wake of increasingly pluralization, attends to the private, not public sphere of life. Attention to individual salvation, personal piety and devotion is not particularly new to the Church. These concerns and themes are historically prominent within the Christian narrative. Take for example, the Apostle John's teaching in John chapter three where Jesus tells an individual, Nicademas, "you must be born from above." There are many such passages in the New Testament, and a similar emphasis is found in Redeemer's message. Individuals are asked to believe the gospel message for their individual salvation.

Privatization, however, does not suggest that a previously absent private and individual focus is introduced into religious life. Rather, privatization describes a historical phenomenon in which religious discourse is "redirected" and "restricted" to the private sphere of life and "redefined" in some substantive sense. Religion is sent home, so to speak. At best, one's "faith," as Stephen Carter observes, becomes something held and believed in private – its role and stature more on the order of a "hobby" or something of personal "taste" than a substantive, life-changing and engaging faith that alters one's engagement with the world.[201] The message of modern culture has

[201] Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*.

often been that personal beliefs are fine as long as they remain personal. Jose Casanova writes,

> The privatization of religion reaches the point in which it becomes both "irreverent" and in "bad taste" to expose one's religiosity publicly in front of others. Like the unconstrained exposure of one's private body parts and emotions, religious confessions outside the strictly delimited religious sphere are considered not only degradation of one's privacy but also an infringement upon the right to privacy of others.[202]

Privatization is a well document phenomenon. In chapter 5 we saw that contemporary religious discourse increasingly reflects the individual and therapeutic concerns of the broader culture.[203] Modern sermons differ little from the plethora of self-help books available at local bookstores. Such adaptations are forms of the Church's accommodation to the trend of privatization. But it does not do so absolutely. Religion doesn't always fit neatly within the box. Recent works of Jose Casanova and Peter Berger suggest that religion breaks out of its prescribed box. While the "private" focus may persist, even dominate, religion also makes forays into the "public" sphere.[204]

Despite forays into the public realm, privatization has altered the religious institutions of our day, limiting the degree to which the religious beliefs of individuals and organized institutional religion can assert their voices in public. Such assertions are offensive. A quiet faith is more acceptable, and Wolfe observes, more common.

Evangelicalism thrives within American culture, comprising as much as 20 percent of the population,[205] yet there is a growing consensus among evangelicals themselves that their overall influence and impact on the broader culture remains low. Americans, in general, are very religious, but their conception of influence is much less. A recent Gallup Poll, for example, found that 67 percent of the American population

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[202] Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, 64.
[203] See Witten, *All is Forgiven*.
[204] See Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*.
[205] James Hunter notes that evangelicals comprise 22 percent of the population (*American Evangelicalism*, 1983, 49). More recently, Christian Smith similarly finds that evangelicals comprise 20.9 percent of the population (*American Evangelicalism*, 1998, 236).

claim membership in a church and 61 percent indicate that religion is "very important to their lives;" yet, 57 percent also believe that religion is losing its influence on American life.[206] Fact or fiction, though religious involvement and commitment remain high, most people believe that religion has a declining influence in American life. But the changes to religion are much greater than the mere loss of public voice or influence.

If religion, as Berger observes, is understood to be "an integrated set of definitions of reality that could serve as a common universe of meaning,"[207] then the trend of privatization is a much greater problem than merely that of redirection to the private sphere of life. Privatization substantively alters religion from the inside out. The effect of pluralism and rationalization upon religious institutions within their private domain transforms religion. Hunter observes that the locus of authority within religious traditions has shifted from the transcendent revelation of God to that of the consuming individual.[208] The rational and economic logic of the market place begins to dominate and reconfigure individual lives along with their most personal relationships. Even privatized religion is not free from the encroachment of rationalization. Religion is commodified – hard edges are softened, the benefits are promoted, options are offered. Privatized religion is something different. The changes are substantive. Today's thriving church may enjoy little more than victory by redefinition.

Redeemer, however, is pursuant of a different kind of victory. Private, individual concerns and themes remain prominent within Redeemer's discourse, but public themes are neither excluded nor softened. Sermons, Bible studies, counseling ministries and individual conversations pursue individual salvation and discipleship, but not at the expense of the public mission of the church.

Church leaders maintain that Redeemer's mission is both to the individual and the city. Redeemer is a church "for" the city – a church over which the city should

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[206] *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1997*, 43.
[207] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 134.
[208] Hunter, "The Changing Locus of Religions," 193.

rejoice, Keller tells his congregation. Proverbs 11:10, "When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices," drives the ministry of Redeemer Presbyterian Church. This verse and others like it are repeated almost like a mantra in newsletters, vision talks, sermons, conversations, leadership meetings and other gatherings. "What kind of church would we have to be so that virtually the entire city rejoices over our success?" Keller asks. The question is addressed in the church's 1990 vision statement: "We would be a church not for ourselves but for New York City. We Christians who commit to it must see Redeemer as a base for continual spiritual healing, strengthening and equipping for ministry in New York." Redeemer, church members and attendants say, exists to "redeem" the city.

A Public Message

Church leaders articulate a theology and strategy of engagement, rather than withdrawal and detachment, which has sometimes characterized evangelical and fundamentalist churches. This message of engagement is not naively preached. Church leaders note the tension between church and culture, between Redeemer and New York, that might result in the church overly identifying with or uncritically embracing the city culture. The pressures of accommodation are strong. The scattered members of the church face real temptation to neglect their faith, practically speaking, when they leave the assembly. As Mac said, "Mondays are difficult."

One member I spoke with admitted the difficulty of letting her faith substantively effect the way she ran her business. She spoke of the tension with co-owners that erupted when she attempted to initiate more accurate record keeping in their "cash-business." Both her business partners and employees were angered over her new enthusiasm for honesty. Church leaders are not naive about the challenges of city life, yet they believe their mission is to press through such obstacles and not look the other way – not merely embrace the city uncritically. This particular woman came to see the

inconsistency between her faith and the practices of her life and decided to narrow the gap. There are things within the city culture that must change.

The pastors of Redeemer do not steer away from the "hard-ball" message of the gospel, as Elizabeth Worthington referred to it. Such practices, however, are counter-intuitive to the logic of the market place. The benefits of following Christ in the world recede in the wake of the obstacles and pains of believing and living out the message. The costs might appear too great. For Elizabeth it included a painful goodbye to a relationship, for the business woman mentioned above it meant enduring anger from business partners, perhaps even losing employees. For Whit it meant giving up sexual practices that conflicted with the gospel message preached at Redeemer. Yet, as important as changes to the individual lives within the congregation are, Redeemer's leadership hopes for changes of a very public order – a change in the overall civility of city life.

Evangelicalism has not been a great help in Redeemer's mission to the city. Despite its commitments to an "engaged orthodoxy," evangelicalism exists and thrives through a strong elaborate subculture. In America, you don't have to search long or hard to find the cultural props of evangelical "faith." They are as near as the radio dial, or the Christian bookstore on the corner. The Christian music, publishing and broadcasting industries thrive in the modern world and are readily available to the evangelical community. "Christian" yellow pages provide listings of "Christian" mechanics, computer salesmen and the like; you can even purchase vinyl siding from the "Christian Vinyl Siding and Roof Company." Products marketed toward the evangelical public are numerous. Yet, when Redeemer's leadership speak of cultural change, they do not mean the kinds of institutional and cultural "supports" that have come to characterize modern evangelicalism. Keller argues that this evangelical subculture is, at best, superficially "Christian" – merely a reflection of "the consumeristic and self-centered dominant

culture."[209] For the leaders of Redeemer, the evangelical enclave is an unsatisfying and inadequate response to the pressures of modernity.

Occupations as Missionary Work

Redeemer leaders speak of developing a Christian counter-culture that is centered in the occupations of those who believe. Counter-cultural Christians, Keller writes in the church newsletter, "move out into the secular world, competing with non-Christians, to produce material characterized both by excellence and by a Christian world view." The instruction to "go forth to serve the world" has this mission of cultural engagement in view.

Church leaders describe their hope for cultural and social change as a process that includes individual conversion that affects the public as well as the private dimensions of their lives. Rather than confine Christianity to the private lives of its adherents, or even to life within the institutional church, church leaders suggest that the church must urge a kind of de-privatized faith. Privatization and rationalization have deeply affected even the more public dimensions of religion. Even public expressions of faith are conceived of in terms of the private and individual activity of proselytizing. To bring one's faith into the work place, for example, means doing evangelism – telling others about the gospel. While a de-privatized faith, at Redeemer, is not less than prosolytization, it is much more. The call to serve the city of New York is as much about the cultural renewal as it is about individual conversion. Individual salvation is a necessity and precursor to cultural renewal. If cultural change is to occur, church leaders maintain, Christians must excel in their vocations and occupations while at the same time maturing in their faith and, just as important and most difficult of all, Christians must begin to engage their vocations theologically by asking and discovering ways in which their faith might inform and transform their work itself. A person's secular work is missionary work.

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[209] Tim Keller, Redeemer Newsletter, April 1997.

Occupations are a vehicle for realizing the "rule" of Christ in the world. Elizabeth Worthington, when given the opportunity to leave her job and move out of the city, decided to remain in her place of employment as a "missionary." Most obviously, that would mean that Elizabeth viewed her work-place as a context for proselytizing – telling others about the message of the gospel in the hopes that they too would believe. On a certain level it does mean that, but it means more. Elizabeth, if she is to truly practice and embody Redeemer's public message must also begin to engage her occupation itself through her faith so that the work itself is renewed. She must begin to think about her work within the entertainment industry differently – ethical standards of Christianity must guide her work, but even more broadly, the work itself must reflect submission to Christ's rule. One of Redeemer's leaders, an artist, told me that "New York is a test case for creating authentic Christian culture – not superficially – not just taking the forms, but really creating." To that end he meets with other artists to discuss the broad ideas of "submitting their work to the Lordship of Christ," and to discuss their particular works. There are a number of affinity ministries and groups within Redeemer: visual arts, theatrical arts, legal and medical groups. "Christianity is for real life," one member observes, "not people retreating from the world." Only as such engagement becomes more and more the norm, leaders maintain, will the culture of the city be changed.

"The gospel speaks with power," one staff member noted during a staff meeting, "to disciples and then to their portfolios." Redeemer's gospel is a "totalizing" message that bears upon every dimension of life. Yet, this message is difficult for many to grasp and even more difficult to practice. The concept of occupational "missionary" work means more than high ethical standards, and it is this broader notion that is so confusing to the hearer. After one sermon in which Keller exhorted people to engage the city a group of one hundred or so gathered downstairs for the question and answer time. Many

asked, “What do you mean?” The morning bulletin included a quote from British theologian John Stott. It read,

> The process of urbanization, as a significant new fact this century, constitutes a great challenge to the Christian church. On the one hand, there is an urgent need for Christian architects, local governments, politicians, urban specialists, developers and community social workers, who will work of justice, peace, freedom and beauty in the city. On the other, Christians need to move into the cities, and experience the pains and pressures of living there in order to win city-dwellers for Christ. Commuter Christianity (living in salubrious suburbia and commuting to an urban church) is no substitute for incarnational involvement.

As the group discussed the sermon that similarly urged Christians to an “incarnational involvement,” one man found the ease with which Stott makes such comments off-putting. “It is easy,” he said, “to call the church to incarnational involvement, but what does this look like practically.” Others asked similar questions. Their questions and comments reveal a prevalent confusion with Redeemer’s public message, and evidences that privatization has a firm grip on the way religion is commonly practiced. Evangelicalism is of little help to Redeemer in articulating a public message. Evangelical concerns are more or less centered in the individual dimensions of conversion and ethical change, not social and cultural transformation – and is generally content with the private sphere. Redeemer leaders, in contrast, hope for a union between private faith and the more public lives of believers. What this union entails remains, however, confusing and unclear.

Such engagement is costly, and the challenge to de-privatize one’s faith is difficult. One member with whom I spoke noted the alienation he experiences in the city because of his Christian faith. He said,

> Live your faith in New York and it will bring you into violence with the world like nothing else. You will be forced to make decisions which will make you unpopular – you will be forced to make decisions that will challenge your friendships.

He went on to add, “Being a Christian is easier in Oklahoma than in New York City.” He told a story of a young woman who attends Redeemer who writes for a women’s magazine. She was known as a Christian in her place of employment and was asked by her supervisor to write an article about the loss of virginity. The young woman was, by her own admission, a virgin, and the supervisor suggested that she might “lose her virginity” and write the article out of her experience. The woman didn’t do the piece. She refused to “bend her knee” to the “immoral” pressures of the work place. I never had the opportunity to speak with her, but the story itself carried a mythic status, illustrating and punctuating the difficulties of the life of faith outside of the assembly. After recounting the story, the member added, “Redeemer provides refreshment – it provides a constant reminder that God is there, that I am not insane for believing.”

However, though Redeemer helps sustain faith, that member fears that the faith of those attending remains largely individually and privately focused. “I see personal change, but that is as far as it goes in my book,” he said, “I do not think people at Redeemer have a sense of how and what they are supposed to do in the outside world,” he added with great frustration. “People don’t have a praxis,” he observed, “they don’t have any sense of how to apply their faith to their work.” Maybe so – certainly the comments I heard during discussion times and through the interviews tend to confirm his suspicions. But the fact that he recognizes the issues and the rather “public” confusion evidences a measure of success in getting Christians to think outside of the prescribed box. A desire for something greater than “personal” change has been awakened, at least among some members of the congregation.

Keller admits that the Christian church has largely failed to extend its concept of discipleship to the more public aspects of the lives of Christians. He acknowledges that privatization is a problem and a threat to the mission of the church. Yet Redeemer, Keller maintains, exists to change the city – “to show the world a vision of life and work under the lordship of Christ.” His words echo the earlier words of Abraham Kuyper that

every inch of the creation belongs to Christ. Redeemer's goal is a city redeemed in its entirety – individuals, neighborhoods, institutions and work. The gospel, leaders maintain, is the key to that happening, both individually and at a societal level. Week after week for the last eleven years worshipers have heard and participated in the benediction and the exhortation to scatter, and they have responded with thanksgiving and, perhaps, a measure of uncertainty and ambiguity as to the particulars of their service.

A Theology of Engagement

Evangelicals have long articulated a theology of cultural engagement. However, functionally, there is noticeable restraint in dealing with the city. Hunter found that the majority of evangelicals (43.7 percent) lived in rural communities with less than 9 percent living in cities of 1 million or more (Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*, 52). According to Harvie Conn, former professor of missions at Westminster Theological Seminary, the complexities and social problems of the city led many evangelicals to flee to the suburbs as a "safeguard from the dangers, cruelties, bad language, suffering and immorality that filled the crowded" urban areas.[210]

Redeemer's leaders, however, reject the separatist mentality endemic to much of evangelicalism. Following and applying Richard Niehbur's analytic types to describe the array of church-city relationships available, Keller argues that Redeemer would be a church that "transforms the city."[211] Such a model, according to Keller, takes seriously

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[210] See Harvie Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church* (Baker: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1994), 47-48.

[211] Tim Keller, "Christ and the City," Redeemer Newletter, October 1998. Keller borrows heavily from Harvie Conn's adaptation and application of Niehbur's *Christ and Culture* to the church's life and ministry in the city. Among the possible relationships, Keller notes, are that Christ is "against," "of," "above," "and" or "transforming" the city. Each of the relationships, with the exception of "transforming," suffers from a number of theological and practical inadequacies, Keller argues. Those churches that view Christ as "against" the city fail to believe that lasting change will come to the city. Such churches become a spiritual fortress in the urban wasteland. Churches "of" the city tend to mirror the city and fail to appreciate the presence of what St. Augustine referred to as the "city of man" within the earthly city. Churches that see Christ "above" the city discern and make use of the city's benefits and wealth, but fail to address the social brokenness of the city. The Christ

the presence of the "kingdom of God" and "moves out into the city of man and transforms it."[212] Harvie Conn says of this model,

> The best analogy to describe all this is that of a model home. We are God's demonstration community of the rule of Christ in the city. On a tract of earth's land, purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the urban neighborhood. . . . As citizens of, not survivalists in, this new city within the old city, we see our ownership as the gift of Jesus the Builder (Luke 17:20-21). As residents, not pilgrims, we await the Kingdom coming when the Lord returns from his distant country (Luke 19:12). . . . in this model home we live out our new lifestyle as citizens of the heavenly city that one day will come. We do not abandon our jobs or desert the city that is. . . . We are to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" to which God called us in exile (Jer.29:7). And our agenda of concerns in that seeking becomes as large as the cities where our divine development tracts are found.[213]

While there are few examples of this model available to the church today, Redeemer, Keller reminds his congregation, has adopted this very model of ministry.

Why aren't others approaching ministry in this way? Keller attributes this to a weak and inaccurate theological view of the kingdom of God. The Redeemer membership syllabus states that the kingdom of God is,

> His [Christ's] power, his rule. . . . It is . . . a) a renewal of the world through the entrance of supernatural forces which are b) substantially, yet c) still partially present. As anything is "brought back under Christ's authority, it is restored to health, beauty and freedom. But the kingdom is partial – it is present, but not fully. This historical period is a period of "overlap" between the kingdom of God (rule of Christ) and the "old world."[214]

The manual continues,

> When we are born again, we enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5), the power of the old world over us is broken (Galatians 1:4; Colossians 1:13), we begin to experience the freedom and restoration from the effects of

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"and" the city view tends to view Christians as pilgrims passing through, but holds out little hope for lasting change.

[212] Keller, "Christ and the City."

[213] Harvie Conn quoted in Keller, "Christ and the City."

[214] Redeemer Membership Manual.

> sin. . . . As we serve God in the world, we bring "kingly blessedness" and "peace" to others (Matthew 5:3,10) which brings healing from the effects of sin. Yet this healing, though substantial, is always partial (Romans 7:14; 8:20-21; Phillippians1:6). To be a Christian is to live in this age with the life of the age to come.[215]

Christians, according to the teaching of Redeemer, live between two worlds –the life to come and this present age. The kingdom has really come, but there is a "not yet" aspect to its coming. Until its full coming, believers are called to live obedient lives, and as they do, they become a source of kingly blessing to those around them. The church should be a conduit for the "kingly blessings of the King."

Christianity, according to Keller, is the only religion "that brings matter and spirit together with integrity."[216] The doctrine of the incarnation illuminates God's commitment to the material aspects of life. God became flesh. Keller says,

> In creation God has his hands in the dirt and dust breathing life into it. He wants integrity between heaven and earth. In the incarnation he entered the creation. . . . He became someone who hungers, who tires. In the resurrection Jesus ate a fish. The future redemption is not disembodied consciousness – no, it's new heavens and a new earth. He redeems matter and spirit. We will eat and drink in the kingdom of God.

It is this image of God with his hands in the dirt that fuels Redeemer's vision for the city. Like God, Christians are called upon to "have their hands in the dirt breathing life into the spiritually dead." Christians are to live an incarnational theology, which means going into the hard places and seeking redemption – on both individual and collective levels. Keller writes, "Only Christianity can talk of salvation of the soul and the establishment of the local medical clinic in the same breath." He writes,

> Unless we preach and use the "kingdom" motif of the Bible, we can develop a Christianity that is individualistic and only concerned with my own personal peace and happiness. The presence of the "kingdom" means that we not only serve him through preaching and teaching and church work, but also through art, business, government, scholarship, in

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[215] Redeemer Membership Manual.
[216] Tim Keller, "Redeeming the City," May 1993.

> which we practice the kingship claims of Christ and bring health and peace to society. The presence of the "kingdom" means we are not only trying to win individuals to Christ, but we are seeking to renew families, neighborhoods, cities, and whole cultures. The presence of the kingdom means we are seeking to promote the whole cause of Christ, and not just build up our little church and denomination.

Keller adds, "Many Churches have doctrinal orthodoxy and a love for personal revival, but without having broad cultural and social concerns. We should combine Luther's passion for justification by faith with Augustine's concern for social transformation."

"New York," according to local journalist John Tierney, "unlike Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia, was not founded by religious visionaries. . . . It was financed by private subscribers with a profane motive. . . . Commerce took precedence over conformity; profits had priority over vague and disputable moral principles. Money was the ultimate measure."[217] New York "was run by commercial interest that catered to popular tastes across the country," Tierney continues. "It was open to any idea that turned a profit."[218]

The dream of profit and success continues to sustain a steady stream of individuals coming to New York hoping that the American Dream might become reality. Indeed, "making it," as Mac Aldin noted, is important to many of the members and attendants that attend Redeemer. "If you can make it in New York," the saying goes, "you can make it anywhere." Indeed, many who comprise Redeemer's congregation are professionals who first arrived in the city with the same goal. New York, the capital of commerce, is the place to make it, make it fast and make it big. The challenge for a church like Redeemer that wishes to seek the wellbeing of the city is to move people beyond a therapeutic and pragmatic use of the city toward a willingness and commitment

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[217] John Tierney, "What's New York the Capital of Now?" *New York Times Magazine* (November 20, 1994), 50.
[218] Tierney, "What's New York the Capital of Now?" 53.

to serve the city "as sons and daughters of the heavenly Father," as Redeemer's liturgy states. The challenge is to change the creed they have come to live by.

Despite the challenges of city ministry, Keller maintains that "the city is God's invention and design, not just some sociological phenomenon or invention of humankind."[219] From the beginning of creation, Keller argues, God intended civilization to develop in an urban direction. Citing texts from Genesis 1, 2 and 11, Hebrews 11 and Revelation 21, Keller articulates a vision of God's plan that not only includes the city but that also culminates in the full redemption of the city. God is "a city builder."[220]

Keller acknowledges that not everyone will agree with him. Some consider biblical references to the city of God to be simply metaphor – a way of speaking in terms that are accessible to the human audience. No, Keller argues – just as God is a Father who is building a family, and a King building a kingdom, so God is a city-builder building a spiritual city. And "as we are to redeem human families by spreading within them the family of God, so we are to redeem human cities by spreading within them the city of God." Further, Keller notes, "the power of cities are such that, as the city goes, so goes society." God, one hears time and time again in sermons, in educational gatherings, in conversations and in small groups, is committed to the city, and so should be the church.

Keller argues that early Christian missionaries, like the Apostle Paul, ministered in the cities of the ancient world, not the countryside. Why? Because cities are most obviously where the people are, and, as importantly, they are places of spiritual searching and of openness to new ideas. Small towns, in contrast, "are places where people are conservative. They are not open to new ideas."[221] Keller suggests that "the country," "idyllic little towns" and places "we go on weekends" were never the focus of missionary activity because there, people live "in the veil of illusion."

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[219] Tim Keller, "Redeemer: The Importance of the City."
[220] Tim Keller, "The Problem of the City," November 7, 1993.
[221] Keller, "The Problem of the City."

> Those idyllic little towns are places where people can hide from themselves the fact of the rawness of life, of the wickedness of the heart, of the transience of life. Those places don't change much, and they have zoning laws to make sure that things don't change. Why? Because they desperately, desperately want to believe that life is OK and that life can be very nice.[222]

Keller's point is that taking refuge in the suburbs or in the countryside is a relatively new strategy for the church, and not a very good one at that. It is, however, a strategy deeply reflective of therapeutic ethos endemic to modern life. In contrast, the city, Keller argues, brings the harsher broken realities of life front and center, and as a result, cities are fruitful ground for the good news of the gospel.

The Bible, Keller argues, urges Christians to identify with and serve the city. Christians must come near the brokenness of humanity and society – not flee for safety. Such values have traditionally characterized the Christian Church,[223] yet they are the very values assaulted by privatization and rationalization in particular. The modern emphasis on the individual and personal wellbeing weakens commitment to sacrifice for the "common good." Altruism has not died. Rather, it is transformed – given a new basis defined largely in terms of the therapeutic benefit to individuals.[224] If the city is to change, Christians both institutionally and individually must return to the earlier model of the church. Keller cites a passage from the prophet Jeremiah, penned during Israel's exile in Babylon, to point out this truth. He says,

> Jeramiah 29 is an amazing passage, because God says to the Israelites [when] they are off in this wicked, terrible place called Babylon, "Identify with the prosperity of that city." He does not say, "Oh, go into the streets and preach to the city, hand out tracts in the city and then get out." He says, "Settle down." He says, "Build houses, have children, identify with the city, identify with the people of the city, identify with the welfare of the city, weave yourselves into the city so that you weave wholeness and health in the city."

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[222] Keller, "The Problem of the City."
[223] See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of the Early Church.*
[224] See Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion.* Also, Kimmon Seargent, in *Seeker Churches,* observes that Seeker sermons accommodate to the therapeutic ethos in their call to altruistic involvement.

God, the congregation is told, calls Christians to do more than preach the message of the gospel to the city; they are called to reside within the boundaries of the city and seek its well-being. “Loving and preaching the gospel,” Keller says, “without doing something about the fact that the schools are crummy” or about other social problems in the city is not enough. Failure to think about and work toward a resolution of these problems is failure to do “what God wants you to do.”

The church is called to bless the city, and that, according to the leadership, at least means that Christians encourage and have hope for the city. “It means,” Keller urges, “that we get rid of our cynicism about the city, because we know that this city will someday be part of the city of our God. ‘The cities of this world will become the city of our God,’ is what the Bible says. And therefore we’ve got a hope that nobody else has.” The greatest enemy, Keller argues, quoting Dorothy Sayers, is “the sin that believes in nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, but therefore enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.”

How can you move beyond the cynicism, the complacency and the banality of this commitment to nothingness? How can the church begin to bless the city? Keller asks. Simply “follow Jesus,” he responds. “We are told in Revelation 21,” he preaches, that “Jesus will live on the center square of the city of God. He’s going to be downtown. The Lamb, the Bible says, will be on that main street that comes out from the Throne of the Lamb. Jesus has built this new city for us to live in.”

“Do you know how He did it?” Keller asks. “He went to an earthly city and wept over it. Remember? ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you knew the things that pertain to your peace, but no, they are hidden from you.’ He went to an earthly city, He wept over that earthly city, He identified with the people of that city, He preached the gospel in that city, and He sacrificed in that city. And as a result, He has built for us ‘a city with

foundations, whose builder and architect is God.'" The Christian must, like Jesus, go to the earthly city, "weep over it, identify with it" and preach the gospel in it, making sacrifices, and so build the "city of God" within it.

The exhortation, "Let us go forth to serve the world as sons and daughters of the Father" is a summary of a complex articulation of what it means to build the city of God within the city of man – of what it means to stop living a privatized version of Christianity. Indeed, it is a call to engagement – for the individuals that make up the church to become committed to something other than their own happiness. When Christians are "living and city-building in New York City in sufficient numbers," the leadership says, the city will change, and not only the city, but also the entire culture as well.

Summary

As public life is pluralized religion is squeezed out – it becomes merely a matter of personal taste and hobby. Middle class Americans, Allan Wolfe argues, have adopted a "quiet" faith. They are content to privately hold their religious commitments and values with little or no attempt to "push" their faith and beliefs into the lives of others.[225] Pluralization along with deeply held convictions about individual freedom contribute to a prevailing and arbitrating commitment to tolerance. Wolfe concludes that middle class America is at once deeply religious and decidedly non-judgmental, and we might add, decidedly private about their religion. Even the religious within his study exhibit a reluctance to impose, or demand that others follow them in their beliefs. The juxtaposition of seemingly opposite states leads Wolfe to conclude of those he studied, "I wondered why, if they were so libertarian, they were as religious as they claimed to be and why, if they were so religious, they were so unwilling to speak of sin or Satan?"[226]

[225] Wolfe, *One Nation, After All*, 52.
[226] Wolfe, *One Nation, After All*, 72.

Religion doesn't decline in the modern world; it is "quieted." Religion remains by and large a private affair. Studies, such as Marsha Witten's analysis of Protestant sermons show us the persistence of religious discourse but also shows that it does so through accommodating therapeutic concerns, diminishing the authoritative side of God, and emphasizing the instrumental value of faith. Such accommodations weaken and transform religion.

The more religious institutions accommodate to the forces of pluralization, privatization and the rationalization of the market place, the more likely they are to become nonexclusive.[227] When this happens, religious culture consists mostly of private products exchanged between individuals apart from a mediating group. Yet, Durkheim observed that religion is deeply social – that "religious representations are collective representations which express collective," not private realities.[228] Pluralization, privatization and rationalization weaken religion if they do not altogether transform it. The modern shift presses religion in the direction of "magic," which Durkheim observes, "has a clientele not a church."[229] In the wake of such transformations, there is little difference between purchasing a hotdog and attending a religious service.

Redeemer has sought to negotiate its relation with culture and resolve the inherent tensions between the church and the world through a very public message. All the world belongs to Christ, the Church historically asserted, and Redeemer continues to sound that message. But what does that look like, the congregation asks. Or in the words of a staff member, is "the gospel speaking with power to the portfolios of the disciple?" Those with whom I spoke were more likely to understand the worldly mission of the church in terms of personal ethical standards – saying no to "immoral" requests, doing evangelism – telling people in their neighborhood or work place about their faith, or volunteering in a soup kitchen, rather than the kinds of cultural changes envisioned by

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[227] Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 203.
[228] Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (The Free Press: New York, N.Y.: 1915), 22.
[229] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 60.

Redeemer's leadership. There are those who gather to discuss the implications of faith on work itself – groups of artists and actors for example. Yet, breaking out of the box is difficult for many who attend Redeemer; the struggle to apply the public message to their own lives evidences as much. The questions of the congregation are indicative of both confusion and progress. Even in the face of such difficulties and the confusion, church leaders maintain that a quiet personal faith is not enough – the gospel is not a private affair.

CHAPTER EIGHT

REVIVING ORTHODOXY

Religious beliefs, Durkheim observed, are rooted in a group – a church. It is not enough for individual members to assent to or to simply receive doctrinal beliefs personally. Such practices render religion far to individualistic an enterprise. Such religions are more closely linked with Durkheim's conception of magic. "There is no Church of magic," Durkheim wrote, for no lasting bonds are produced – either between magicians and their constituents or between the "clientele" themselves. Magic produces no moral community.

> The magician has a clientele and not a Church, and it is very possible that his clients have no other relations between each other, or even do not know each other; even the relations which they have with him are generally accidental and transient; they are just like those of a sick man with his physician.[230]

A church, in contrast, is a moral community.

Modernity & Postmodernity

The rise of therapeutic culture renders the kinds of moral communities envisioned by Durkheim problematic. Therapeutic culture makes it particularly difficult for the Christian church to maintain its integrity as a community. The forces of pluralization, privatization and rationalization that were born in the modern age and matured in the postmodern weaken its moral community. These modern forces are ubiquitous and shape religious institutions from the inside out.

While the cultural changes associated with postmodernism, especially the rejection of grand narratives capable of uniting all experience within one overarching story, sharply distinguish it from modernism, there are continuities between modernism

[230] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 60.

and postmodernism that are rooted in the forces of pluralism, privatization and rationalization. Postmodernism is born out of the modern context and extends pluralism, privatization and rationalization to their extremes.[231] Take, for example, pluralism. "Postmodernity," Zygmunt Bauman notes, "is marked by a view of the human world as irreducibly and irrevocably pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order, either in actuality or in potency."[232] While both the pre-modern and the modern world knew something of pluralism, there is a shift – a difference – in postmodernism. In ancient civilizations conflicting cultures went to war and fought for a vision of the world as it ought to be. In modern times, notions of truth centered in religion were rejected, but the modern world retained the notion of a center – something worth fighting over. The postmodern shift, however, has meant among other things the demise of meaningful distinctions in life and the notion of "authority" itself.

Postmodernism, Kenneth Gergen contends, is rooted in "the full-scale abandonment of the concept of objective truth."[233] Disdain for and disbelief in grand narratives is marked by tolerance and non-judgementalism, if not indifference. In the absence of transcendence there is very little to fight about or for. The pluralism of postmodernity diminishes the possibility of any form of binding address – religious or scientific. Even the "isms" of modernity, Daniel Bell notes, "are now passe. . . . There is no center; there are only peripheries."[234] The postmodern world, despite its plurality, is a world of indifference and homogenization in which even the peripherial and powerless cultures ultimately lose their depth.

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[231] See Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (Routledge: New York, 1992), and Daniel Bell, *The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journeys* (Abot Books: Cambridge, 1980).
[232] Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, 35.
[233] Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 82.
[234] Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Basic Books:New York, 1976), 104.

The forces of privatization and rationalization persist along side of pluralization. The concept of authority, rather than rooted in notions of transcendence, is deeply privatized. Authority resides in the consuming therapeutic self. Rationalization, expressed in the dominant logic of the market economy, comes more and more to define all relationships – even the religious. Loss of transcendence weakens authority, relocating it within the private sphere – within individuals themselves. Further, that which "works," that which is "efficient," becomes the only meaningful logic in the world split apart into a multiplicity of views. Mass media and technologies both sustain and bombard individuals and societies with the realities of pluralism, privatization and rationalization. Belief in authority and the communities that sustain such belief are weakened.

"Tradition," Edward Shils observes, "is anything which is transmitted or handed down from past to present."[235] Yet, is tradition, as conceived by Shils, possible in our day? Can anything be passed down apart from widespread suspicion of authority and binding address? Religion persists, and though postmodernism opens up the possibility of re-enchanting the world, it does so differently – not in the original terms of the past. Traditions are not taken seriously; they are not authoritative. They are taken playfully. Consequently, the conflict between religious orthodoxy and culture is stronger than before. Though modernity was problematic for religion, postmodernism is utterly antagonistic. How then, do carriers of traditions – such as religious communities – resolve the tension between the faith once given and the culture at hand? This question, as much as any other, frames this study of Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

Resolving the Tension: Reviving the Past

There is a range of responses to the forces of modernity. Fundamentalist churches pull away from the world, while Mainline churches tend to embrace and assimilate the world in its response. Evangelicals, as a movement fall somewhere in the middle – between the extremes of withdrawal and assimilation. Each response is

[235] Shils, *Tradition*, 12.

sociologically legitimate. Redeemer is an evangelical church and like other evangelical churches, it neither pulls away from the world nor assimilates it. From the beginning, however, Redeemer leaders identified a problem within the church of their day and specifically the churches within their city – the loss of tradition itself. Though they didn't use this phrase, they meant it. The church, leaders argued, was out-of-touch with its past. They maintained that the "historic gospel" is lost within conservative and liberal churches alike. Even evangelical churches were not exempt from the "amnesia" that seemed to grip the church. Redeemer is a renewal movement within the church attempting to reconnect the church with its past – the historic gospel of the Reformation.

The message of Redeemer is situated in the weekly preaching during Sunday services and the small group Bible studies that meet throughout the city during the week. Through these venues the congregation hears about a different world from the one in which they live the other six days of the week and presumably, one that is different from that offered through other churches. They learn about God, about themselves, and about their calling and obligations in the world. They learn of God's love and mercy, but also that God is a judge – a law-giver – and that there is danger in transgression.

The leadership of Redeemer is comfortable talking about "sin." Each year yields a new series that directly touches on some aspect or dimension of sin, and, aside from special series devoted explicitly to the topic, week after week Keller and others who preach at Redeemer identify the problem of sin, and they do so in strikingly traditional ways. Themes of "unconditional obedience," "submission," "surrender" and "commitment" are prominent in Redeemer's message. Such themes led Elizabeth Worthington to the early conclusion that Redeemer "is hard-ball Christianity." And Mac Aldin similarly noted that, "Redeemer is not light on holiness."

In terms of its message, Redeemer presents the traditions of the gospel as "binding address." There is exclusivity to its message. It is to be received, believed and

lived. The Sunday morning congregation is unashamedly told that Jesus is the only way to God. "There is no middle ground," Keller tells his congregation. If salvation is to be had, it comes through this gospel message. At the same time, however, the pastors know their congregation – their struggles, fears and failures – and they address the real issues of the lives of those within the church by speaking to the particulars of their experience.

The past and present unite at Redeemer. The past, we could say, is a lamp for the present – a guiding light. Traditional formulations of doctrines are brought to bear upon the present lives of those who attend – in some sense the past is used to judge the present and guide the participant and institution through the realities of life in the present moment. Redeemer is in the grip of a specific past that it identifies as "historic" or orthodox Christianity – "the gospel of the Reformation." This gospel formulation identifies Redeemer in terms of its tradition – a tradition that gives shape to the church.

Redeemer is not, however, solely a church of the past; Redeemer is not merely a "traditional" church. "Only living, knowing, desiring human beings," Edward Shils points out, "can enact [traditions] and reenact them and *modify* them."[236] Tradition, even as it is enacted and reenacted, is always modified. The past, even as it is brought to bear upon the present, is contemporized as traditional dogma is joined to dimensions and aspects of social and cultural life that never existed during the time of earlier formulations. Keenly aware of the tenuous status of tradition within modern society, T. S. Eliot also notes the simultaneous existence of past and present within the traditional writer. "Tradition," he observes,

> Involves, in the first place, the historical sense. . . . The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is

[236] Shils, *Tradition*, 14-15.

> what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.[237]

Eliot is speaking of poets, but lines are easily drawn to society as a whole and religious institutions in particular.

Samuel Heilman underscores the importance of uniting past and present in his study of Orthodox Jews who engage in the practice of "lernen," a ritual study of the ancient texts that brings the past to bear upon the present and the present upon the past.[238] Heilman found that the ancient world became a means of understanding, repairing and completing the present. The process, however, was complex. The present world also must be brought to bear upon the ancient texts. The process is fraught with danger. The text might remain obscure and irrelevant to the real lives of adherents on the one hand, or the ancient text itself might be overwhelmed and obscured by the act of contemporarizing, on the other. Both aspects, however, are critical to the persistence of the tradition itself – to continuity between past and present.

The way in which the therapeutic ethos pervades the preaching at Redeemer is of particular interest and importance. It is hard to miss the fact that the leadership, especially the pastors of Redeemer, is deeply concerned for the individual's wholeness and well-being. Accordingly, it is not unusual to hear references to the benefits of belief or more broadly, references to the "self." However, it would be pedantic to assume that mere references to therapeutic themes constitute accommodation to therapeutic culture – that Redeemer's discourse, for example, like the sermons in Marsha Witten's study, are uprooted from the older tradition. Far from accommodation, the sermons and teaching, indeed the general ethos of the church, conveys a much different message – that of the

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[237] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 37.
[238] Samuel Heilman, *The People of the Book*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1983), 62-63.

authority and binding address of Christian orthodoxy. The gospel message is non-negotiable – it is not open to revision.

The message as presented at Redeemer is not a message of the Reformation of the sixteenth century alone – it is a synthesis of old and new, past and present. Tradition is brought to bear upon the present in relevant and meaningful ways through the articulation of the gospel tradition in light of the present culture – a culture characterized by triumphant therapeutic values.

In contrast to much of evangelicalism, the instrumental value of Christianity is not set forth as the reason for faith. Benefits are real and they are mentioned, but they are secondary. As Keller once told the congregation, Christ is not a vitamin supplement. No, becoming a Christian totally changes and reorients the whole of one's life in a new direction. In other words, "believers" are not free to believe any old thing they choose – God is a certain way and not another. Defining reality is God's prerogative – not that of humankind. Though Redeemer pastors talk about the self and its modern up-rootedness, they by and large do not do so through the prevailing logic of therapeutic culture in which the choosing individual stands at center. "You can not have God on your terms," Keller says, rather, you must come to God on his terms. Or more to the point, "Don't come to [God] with your agenda and try to fit him in. He will not be used. Don't come to be a better husband, a better wife, or to be happier. Don't come to him because he is exciting and relevant – though he is." Rather, Keller tells the congregation, "come to him for him, because he is true."[239] Such statements are commonplace at Redeemer, and their inclusion in the community's religious discourse is illustrative of the grip therapeutic and consumer culture has upon those that comprise the church.

The message of Redeemer is not soft-peddled nor does it reflect the kind of quiet faith characteristic of respondents in Wolfe's study of the middle class. Christianity, as presented at Redeemer, is exclusively the way to God, and not only for the present

[239] Tim Keller, Sermon on Luke 14:25-27, June, 4, 2000.

hearers, but for the whole world. It would be difficult to attend Redeemer and not hear that message, and perhaps respond either positively or negatively to the "call" to come under the "norms" of the faith. However, coming to the point of committing in terms of membership to this community of faith is a slow process for most that attend Redeemer.

Redeemer is a transient church (47.4 percent in the survey indicated they had lived in the city less than 5 years). And that transience almost certainly contributes to the low level of membership. Only 24.3 percent in our sample had actually taken the membership vows. But church attendance for the average attendant was both high and regular. Nearly 78 percent indicated that they attended Redeemer worship services at least three times a month. In contrast to their frequent attendance, 72.4 percent indicated that they were not involved in the work of the church as a ministry volunteer. This pattern of membership and involvement is itself a window into the strength of the cultural forces of modernity as well as the transformation of religion itself.

A Market Niche

For better or worse the logic of the market significantly alters the way individuals and the institutional carriers of religion approach religion. Churches compete, sometimes explicitly and sometimes unwittingly, for "believers." Redeemer does not explicitly "market" itself – though through its traditional and jazz services, Redeemer carves out a peculiar niche within New York's religious economy. Moreover, the commitment to offer distinctively styled services is sympathetic to the logic of the market place and with religious consumers themselves. Neither the traditional or jazz services, however, approach the kinds of market adaptations prevalent within some sectors of evangelicalism. Redeemer adapts to the cultural styles familiar to New Yorkers, but worshipers still encounter orthodox creeds, prayers and rituals of worship; Redeemer does not reduce worship to entertainment. The offering of stylized services, however, may perpetuate the habit of consumer choice. Indeed, some attenders do not seemingly approach the church any differently than they do other dimensions of their lives.

I have cited examples of those who have crossed the divide into a position of commitment. In an old sense of the phrase, they seem to have "received the faith," and in doing so have come to "belong." To the degree that they have "come under the norming influence" of the worship and message of Redeemer, as one respondent referred to the worship, real commitment in terms of belief and in terms of relationships within the community emerges. Yes, some do commit, but others in attendance on any given Sunday may well continue to view the faith in individualistic, pragmatic, and perhaps consumeristic terms. The pastors acknowledge that these are the very people that show up on Sunday morning. Their applications of biblical texts finger such characteristics. "Either you are using God," Keller tells the congregation, "or [you are] giving yourself to him to use you – there is no middle ground." The more likely scenario, however, is that many of those in attendance seek to "use God as a means to an end." Keller contends that a failure to challenge the consumeristic "use" of God leaves the secular world view intact. Rather than replicate and reinforce the pragmatic and rationalistic values endemic to secular culture, Redeemer challenges these tendencies.

If Redeemer can be thought of as filling a market niche, its niche is that of religious orthodoxy in New York City. The contribution of this study, however, is not the discovery of a traditional and orthodox church now popular among New York City professionals. In a pluralistic religious economy one might expect traditional churches to coexist, even thrive alongside of mainline, fundamentalist and accommodative churches. Redeemer is only one response to the tensions between church and culture. The value of this study, however, is that Redeemer shows us "how" the tensions between religious orthodoxy and secularization are resolved through the content of messages and through community.

Sustaining Orthodoxy in the Postmodern World

Accommodations of one sort or another have been part of the church's dance with culture throughout the ages. Evangelicals readily acknowledge the accommodations

of liberals to the ideas and commitments of modernity. Yet, they also have their own accommodations rooted in the methods and logic of modernity. The rationalizing forces, for example, are writ large within the conservative church growth movement popular with evangelicals. I have argued that Redeemer is not accommodative to the forces of modernity or postmodernity. Its message is strikingly traditional and though, a large church, it sustains smaller settings of face to face relations necessary to building community. Redeemer has not followed the kinds of "seeker" strategies that are increasingly popular among other evangelical churches.

Redeemer, a very traditional church, thrives in New York City. I use the term a bit tongue-in-cheek. Redeemer is a young church, and it scarcely makes a dent in a city the size of New York. Yet it is a large church – its weekly attendance is over 3000 and other churches have been started by Redeemer as well. Its influence, however, is much wider still. Redeemer has become a model church within the Presbyterian Church in America, largely because it is perceived as a success. Pastors within Redeemer's parent denomination, the PCA, know of Keller – they borrow freely from him in their ministries and in their preaching. Those beginning new churches within the PCA are likely to be familiar with the "Redeemer way." As Keller personally, and Redeemer corporately, resolve the tensions of secularization for themselves, they also resolve them for churches within their institutional field that struggle with similar cultural and social uncertainties.[240]

Limited Transferability

Other churches would do well to consider the limitations of Redeemer's success. Redeemer's message and ministry are contextualized; they are rooted in the particulars of New York City's professional culture. The pastors, to their credit, are quick to offer the disclaimer that onlookers shouldn't simply borrow from Redeemer without also translating or contextualizing to their particular situations. There are differences between

[240] DiMaggio and Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited," 75.

New York and other large cities and, especially, between New York and small towns or rural areas. There is little indication that Redeemer's style and message would "work" in more blue-collar communities or rural areas. Redeemer's success is limited.

Yet, the cultural forces of modernity and postmodernity are not subject to geographic boundaries. Therapeutic values, consumer culture, technology and mass-communication are not limited to New York City – they are everywhere. Ironically, the ubiquity of the forces of modernity and postmodernity may actually contribute to the possibility of translating Redeemer's solutions into other churches and contexts. Redeemer's resolution may well be applicable to other churches that struggle with similar tensions in very different settings.

Another limitation, however, poses a greater problem to those that would "mimic" Redeemer. Redeemer's resolution to the tensions between church and culture – between orthodoxy and secularization – have been centered in Keller – his understanding, his articulation of the message, his abilities and skills. Keller's role as a leader is central to any discussion of Redeemer's success. Orthodoxy, borrowing Shils language, is not "independently self-reproductive."[241] If the crust of secularization has been broken through, it is largely due to the leadership of Keller. He has resolved these tensions for himself and thus, for those who "follow him." One of Redeemer's great strengths is the leadership of its pastor.

At the same time, however, Keller is potentially the church's greatest weakness. While members remain largely enthusiastic about his messages, they also express concern that "Redeemer grow past the personality cult," as one member expressed it. Redeemer's leadership is aware of Keller's centrality, yet the elders also acknowledge that success that orbits around one man's resolution is ultimately short-lived. Accordingly, church leaders hope that its multi-site strategy will de-centralize the church, anchoring it in specific

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[241] Shils, *Tradition*, 14-15.

neighborhoods around Central Park. These congregations develop their own leadership, their own educational classes and their own small group Bible studies. The hope is that through diversifying leadership, anchoring the church in neighborhoods and encouraging more face-to-face relationships within those congregations that these "congregations" of Redeemer will become less dependent on Keller. The multi-site approach enables Redeemer to grow larger, but also smaller and deeper, while continuing to acknowledge Keller's popular appeal. The downside, according to one former attender, is that now three congregations (a forth one is planned for this year) are dependent on Keller who travels from service to service as the principal preacher. The multi-cite strategy has the appearance of an older parish-style ministry, but the shift may merely have the effect of adding more services to Redeemer's Sunday schedule.

As Redeemer has grown in size the circle of shared leadership within the church has grown smaller. In the early days of the church the other pastors, Jeff White and Scott Sherman, along with Tim and Kathy Keller and several other lay leaders met regularly discussing the progress and direction of the church – each pastor had particular responsibilities, but they enjoyed a sense of inclusion in the broader issues of the church. As the church grew, the staff grew and the scope of shared-leadership decreased. Such pragmatic changes, according to one leader in the church, has left Redeemer "pastorally weak.." The turn-over among the pastors at Redeemer is quite high. Every assistant or associate pastor that served Redeemer during my time in the congregation, as well as several who arrived after 1995, have left for other pastoral positions. While such moves represent a form of institutionalization in so far as former pastors take the "Redeemer way" to other places and contexts, it also is a loss to the community of Redeemer. The loss of shared leadership and the high turnover among the pastors have not helped move Redeemer beyond the perception of the "personality cult" mentioned by some members.

At this stage in Redeemer's short history its solution to secularization is substantive, but self-limited. Keller's leadership is central to the resolution, but his

leadership alone is not enough to sustain orthodoxy across the generations of a community or even across multiple contexts. The message must be woven into the fabric of the church itself – it must be institutionalized.[242] Unless other leaders, pastoral and lay leaders alike, become adept at resolving the tension between orthodoxy and secularization, the solutions found within Redeemer will not survive Keller. This is not a profound mystery – religious institutions, Miller observes, become "routinized" and "encrusted bureaucracies" over time, but within such contexts reformist movements emerge.[243] Churches have always faced the dilemma of appropriating the past – of appropriating its traditions within emerging contexts. If secularization, as Neitz observes, is a non-linear process,[244] so is its resolution. Resolution of secularization is the work of particular people within particular contexts and it is, in some sense, always temporary – always limited. Each generation works to resolve the tension for themselves. Redeemer embodies a limited solution to the tension between Christian orthodoxy and the pressures of secularization.

Redeemer Presbyterian Church is an orthodox church in the heart of New York City. Its progress cannot be explained in terms of Keller's appeal alone. Many people have cooperated within a social and cultural context replete with resources to create this church. How have they done it?

The Growth of the Early Church

The early Christian Church, sociologist Rodney Stark observes, grew from 1000 or so adherents to nearly 16 percent of the Greco-Roman population three centuries later. It is unusual, Stark notes, for a new cult (and that is what the early church was) to gain a following in the midst of a pluralistic religious economy like that of the Roman Empire. Pagan religions were numerous. As the Roman Empire advanced the gods and

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[242] See Shils, *Tradition*, 230 and Howard Becker, *Art Worlds*, 300-311.
[243] Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 180.
[244] Neitz, *Charisma and Community*, 258.

religious practices of the nations were simply added to the pantheon. Why, Stark asks, did the early Christian church rise as it did?

The rise of the early church, Stark contends, was rooted in the social and historical happenings of the day. The second and third centuries were characterized by devastating plagues. As the plagues swept through village and country side, people died everywhere. No one was exempt. The plagues, however, brought much more than death to the people of ancient times. They included a kind of social death, as communities were uprooted and overturned, and as families and normal social ties and bonds were obliterated. The social consequences were tremendous.

In this context of plague, Stark notes three things that contributed to the church's dramatic growth. First, the Christians offered satisfactory explanations for the plague itself. The message of the church, of course, spoke of a better afterlife for those who believed, but as important Stark suggests, the message of the church provided a deeper understand of and explanation for the plagues themselves. The Christian church believed that God was a God of plan and purpose. Suffering itself was purposeful not arbitrary and random. In contrast, the pagan religions offered little or no explanation for the tragedies of the day. They seemed incapable of interfacing with the present frightening realities. Even the pagan priests, Stark points out, abandoned the city and the people in pursuit of personal safety.

Secondly, Stark notes that the Christians, in contrast to the pagan priests, by and large did not flee for safety, but became agents of mercy. Christians embrace the norm of "social service and sacrifice." Stark is not suggesting that sacrifice and service are the exclusive property of the Church, but that values of kindness, love and mercy are strongly encouraged and nurtured within its community. In a day when others were fearful for their own lives and safety – Christians risked their lives to care for their own as well as those that were not their own.

The third reason for the rise of the early church, Stark contends, is centered in the weakened social ties that characterized the plague torn world. Perhaps as much a 1/3 of the population died. The interpersonal attachments that previously sustained social life were lost. These social ties are critical to belief. While most converts to a religious group will often mention their new "beliefs" as the reason for conversion, they often fail to identify the relational component of faith. Loffland and Stark previously observed that such attachments were as important as the beliefs themselves to conversion.[245]

Stark argues that the combination of weakened social ties, the early church's explanations of suffering and its acts of mercy led to its rise. As social ties were broken by death and transience new interpersonal attachments were formed between believers and non-believers, and as non-believers encountered the community of believers, received care and heard the church's message, that message was received as credible and the Church grew. Redeemer's success is rooted in a similar paradigm.

Cultural Crisis as Plague

No century has experienced the kinds of dramatic social and cultural transformations – upheavals – as the twentieth century. These social changes, however, are a double-edged sword – advantageous, but costly. The advantages of the many scientific and technological advances in the modern age are obvious enough – reduced mortality, increased life expectancy, higher standards of living for many, attention to human rights, and faster communications and travel. The costs, however, are at once subtle and catastrophic. The self on the edge of the twenty-first century is assaulted with opportunity yet, lacks the certainties requisite to commitment and stability. "It should not be a surprise," the Bergers and Kellner assert, "that modern man is afflicted with a permanent identity crisis, a condition conducive to considerable nervousness."[246] Novelist Walker Percy observes, "The castaway of the twentieth-century novel does not

[245] John Loffland and Rodney Stark. "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* (30: 1965, 862-875).
[246] Berger, Berger and Kellner, *The Homeless Mind*, 78.

know who he is, where he came from, what to do, and the signs on the island are ambiguous."[247] Ironically, in an age of faster communication, the castaway, "if he does encounter another human on the island . . . has trouble communicating with him or her."[248] "The real pathology," Percy concludes,

> Lies . . . not in the station wagon or the all-electric kitchen, which are, after all, very good things to have – but rather in the quality of the conscience . . . . I can only characterize this consciousness by such terms as impoverishment and deprivation and by the paradoxical language of the so-called existentialists, terms like loss of community, loss of meaning, inauthenticity, and so on – paradoxical because such deprivations occur in the face of strenuous efforts toward better consumership, more cmmunciation, a multiplication of communities, finding "more meaningful relationships," "creativity," and so on.[249]

Ours, is not a plague like that of the first century – people are not dying in the streets, not literally. But the effect of the cultural changes associated with modernity and postmodernity on community, on face to face relationships, on the self, on the social ties and bonds that sustain the self and community, construct a similar social circumstance to that of the plagues of the first two centuries.

At the center of such change is the modern anchorage of authority within the subjective experience of individuals. The shift includes a loss of absolutes, a loss of notions of anything sacred and thus, a loss of all God-terms. "God is dead," Nietzche's madman proclaimed, "and we have killed him. . . . How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves?"[250] The modern world renders belief in God implausible. Yet, apart from such belief, religious orthodoxy, which is rooted in transcendent or ultimate realities that are, in the end, non-negotiable, is impossible. With God's demise, the modern church, Nietzche was little more than a "tomb or sepulcher." The loss of certainty, of transcendence, of authority, the denial of difference and particularity and the

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[247] Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (The Noonday Press: New York, N.Y., 1991), 216.
[248] Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 216.
[249] Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 210.
[250] Friedrich Nietzche, "The Gay Science," in *The Portable Nietzche* (Penguin Books: New York, N.Y., 1954),95.

affirmation of inclusion contribute to the modern condition of homelessness – a condition not easily overcome. As James Hunter observes,

> It is through a strategy of inclusion, which includes the denial of all particularity, that one guarantees the death of all god-terms capable of rendering morality authoritative within communities and binding on conscience. . . . Character cannot develop out of values "nominated" for promotion, "consciously chosen" by a committee, negotiated by a group of diverse professionals, or enacted into law by legislators. Such values, have by their very nature, lost the quality of sacredness, their commanding character, and thus their power to inspire and to shame.[251]

Redeemer's ministry is centered among a segment of the city most affected by the forces of modernity and postmodernity. They are educated, transient, technologically savvy, career-focused with little time for personal relationships, they are cut off from families, highly individualistic, aware of the plurality of life worlds, non-committal and they are therapeutically minded. The attachments that nurture and sustain commitments are largely absent from their lives.

Elizabeth, Mac and Whit describe their pre-Christian life in varying degrees of misery and disappointment. Elizabeth was twice divorced and, at the time of coming to Redeemer, was involved with a man that wanted the "benefits" of relationship apart from commitment. Her hurt was not new; it was enduring. Mac had lost faith in the church as a guide for his life and he pulled away, but living apart from the church didn't ease his guilt or loneliness. Whit grew up with a high degree of relational dysfunction and said of his adult life, "it was pathetic." Another member I spoke with confided, "I felt very alienated and alone." She recalled asking her therapist, "why do I feel like an alien on this planet? Why do I feel homesick when I'm at home?" A young Asian woman said she was "going through a lot of pain" when she first attended Redeemer. "People will let you down," she said. She had been let down and was only beginning to exit the cynicism that defined her relationships. Relational dysfunction, loneliness, alienation, malaise, fear

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[251] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, 225.

and lack of commitment are common themes in the modern world and they are themes that run through the lives of those that show up week after week at Redeemer. Outwardly they carry the face of success, but inwardly they describe a struggle to secure a "foothold."

"Character," Hunter writes, "is formed in relation to convictions and is manifested in the capacity to abide by those convictions even in, *especially in*, the face of temptation. This being so, the demise of character begins with the destruction of creeds, the convictions, and the 'god-terms' that made those creeds sacred to us and inviolable within us."[252] Hunter argues that the cultural conditions that create and sustain character have ceased to exist. The communities that nurture the creedal life are at least weakened in their ability to navigate the troubled waters of the postmodern situation. Yet, sustaining the creedal life in communities of memory is essential to the development of character.

In our culture, Hunter notes, "there is nothing there that one need believe, commanding and demanding its due, for 'truth' is but a matter of taste and temperament."[253] Hunter concludes that character flows from a narrative that unites and integrates the individual self with communal purposes outside of the self – narrative binds "dissimilar others to common ends."[254] And here is the rub, "nearly everything in our culture undermines [a narrative's] credibility."[255] The moral vision that creates and sustains character only survives, Hunter observes, "through the enactments of the particular lives, traditions, and institutions that constitute the living memory of our communities."[256] Such habits of being are at best difficult in our day, if not altogether absent. The present cultural crisis is plague-like in its effects upon the self and society.

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[252] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, xiii.
[253] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, xiv.
[254] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, 227.
[255] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, 227.
[256] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, 227.

Recovering Creed & Community

From its beginning, Redeemer, sought to minister to the social world in which character is dead, really, to the people who inhabit this world through its message of the gospel – the creeds of orthodoxy. The historic gospel, church leaders believe, has something to say about the everyday lives of those who attend Redeemer. The people describe the teaching of the church as: "the best," "encouraging," "a hook that makes you stay," "addressing the needs of intellectually inclined people," "spiritually sound," "culturally relevant" and "foundational." Such responses may well suggest a threshold to secularization. Even those who inhabit social contexts in which pluralization, privatization and rationalization are advanced continue to have an abiding attraction to the concept of sin and authority as explained in Redeemer's messages. The relocation of authority from the transcendent to the individual fosters doubt and uncertainty, but it has not diminished the thirst for ultimate answers and solutions to life issues. Elizabeth, for example, though resistant to transcendent authoritative solutions that insist on commitment, continued to search for solutions to her struggles until she ended up at Redeemer. The interest and response to Redeemer's message may suggest that to "play with the forms" is not enough – people still want their lives to have meaning.

Redeemer offers the searcher meaning through an authoritative message rooted in transcendence – a message that is non-negotiable and that requires surrender. "Redeemer provides a constant reminder that God is there, that I am not insane for believing," one member told me. Participation and membership connects him with a grand narrative outside of himself – a narrative that is greater than himself, a narrative that leads him out of himself. He is at once connected with others who believe. As Durkheim observes, the individuals that make up a church "feel themselves united to each other by the simple fact that they have a common faith."[257]

[257] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 59.

This conviction, however, that he is not insane stems from much more than merely receiving a message that tells him so – it stems from participation in "public" worship, and from the personal attachments and face to face relationships that have begun to fill his world. The ritual of worship – prayers, songs, confessions, the preaching and responses to worship enact a world that is quite different from the world around him; such worship is essential to the perpetuation of the tradition of the gospel in the lives of its adherents. People do cross the divide and Redeemer has helped them do so. "The heart," Pascal once noted, "has its reasons, which reason does not know."[258] In the visible moments of the church's life the invisible elements inhere. The present world is "keyed" to an unseen world – through message, worship and community.

The message, even the worship of the church alone, are not enough to sustain orthodoxy in the midst of the cultural forces of modernity. Recaptured face to face interaction is critical. Orthodoxy is sustained through community. Many of those who attend Redeemer are brought by friends, colleagues, work associates or neighbors. Friendship connections are key. Loffland and Stark demonstrate their centrality to conversion, but they are also critical to "keeping" the faith. The difficulties of living the Christian life in a place like New York the rest of the week are real. The struggles Mac Aldin spoke of are not imagined. He is bombarded with opportunity to doubt and to give up on his faith. But Mac is not alone in his struggle and he knows this. The small groups at Redeemer provide such community for those who participate. One woman who regularly attends one of Redeemer's home bible studies told me that her involvement with the group helped her get out of a "wrong life-style" and onto the "right path." Another member said "the small group is your core – your nucleus." His small group provided him with "accountability" that helped him "break a lotto-habit." "Real community," he said, "is when push comes to shove people are there for you."

[258] Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, no.277

Redeemer, has been a place for such community for those who have committed to higher levels of involvement.

The face to face interaction, noted by Neitz, is important to sustaining faith Monday through Saturday. Throughout the week, the smaller gatherings of groups of people are an important dimension of living the faith. People like Elizabeth, Mac, Whit and others have found the message credible and believable within the context of these face to face relationships. The slowness of the process of conversion and of commitment itself is indicative of the power and sway of other values and cultural forces – like commitments to individualism, experience of pluralism, fewer opportunities for community and to the hegemony of rationalistic consumer and therapeutic culture itself.

In the context of the ritual of worship and of their relationships, new-comers hear a message that speaks to the plague-like symptoms of their lives – alienation, dysfunction, loneliness, strained relationships, competitiveness, addictions, over-work, an inability to commit, consumerism and the like. Members have come to embrace this message as credible. As their lives begin to reflect values of compassion and mercy, the very characteristics that at one time connected them with Redeemer's message, they become the ones who bring friends and colleagues to church, exposing them to ideas from the past in the hope that they too will be changed by the historic gospel.

Accommodation & Orthodoxy

Accommodation entails the loss of tradition. It is an over-adaptation and, in the case of the church, it is a form of secularization. Redeemer is a window into the broad issue of accommodation – its responses to the tension between church and culture tell us something about the nature of accommodation itself. Accommodation within American evangelicalism is well documented along the lines of pluralism, privatization and rationalization. To the degree that these forces shape the church, the church will also reinforce, develop or nurture different habits of the heart. It is obvious that churches thrive through such accommodations. Yet, such accommodations reinforce secular

world views much more than they challenge them. On the surface – a church may continue to profess orthodox creeds, but the means and methods of its profession are not neutral.

The taken-for-granted world created and sustained through accommodation is much like that of the secular world. That which is "keyed" through messages, rituals of worship and through friendship has little to do with transcendence and much more to do with the norms and values of the market economy itself. The medium is the message. As churches have embraced modern technology, management principles, entertaining worship, slick advertisements they have approached consumers on their own terms as consumers, but have failed to move them beyond consumption. Churches have failed to understand that the delivery mechanism shapes the message – may even contradict the message. In the wake of such adaptations, how is the religious consumer to find salvation in a place that has become so much like the world they inhabit the other six days of the week?

In a day of global capitalism, rampant consumer culture, technique and mass communication and eroded face to face interaction – is the religious orthodoxy sustainable? Herein lay the problem for Redeemer, for evangelicals and for all religions in general. When religious institutions reinforce the secular culture and especially, when that secular culture is characterized, as ours is, by therapeutic values the church loses its collective dimension – privatization and rationalization alter the way in which people approach religion – community dies even as the clientele gathers for worship.

Contributions of this Study

This dissertation contributes to the sociological study of religion in four ways. This study highlights the value of ethnography as a method in studying change within religious traditions. It also evidences the persistence of orthodoxy along with secularization and identifies that the tensions between orthodoxy and secularization find resolution through the content of sermons and community. Finally, this study of

Redeemer observes a general ambivalence to such resolution among religious participants.

Method

No one disputes that American's remain a deeply religious people. Church attendance, membership, prayer, charitable contributions, Bible reading and other religious activity continue to characterize the lives of many Americans. Survey data tells a story of the persistence of religious life, but says very little about the internal dimensions and transformations of religious institutions or of the changing way in which religious adherents approach religion.

In contrast, methods that involve participant observation force the researcher into the institutions and communities in which the religious live and struggle. Cultural products – sermons, worship services, bulletins, Bible studies, written pamphlets and other cultural products – are observed, identified and analyzed. Moreover, ethnography pulls the role and function of leaders into the field of observation and analysis. Interviews with religious participants and leaders open understanding as to the way in which religion is approached or utilized in the lives of its adherents. Ethnography anchors generalizations of cultural trends and observations in the particulars of a context, of a group, of a peculiar people. This study of Redeemer Presbyterian Church demonstrates the utility of ethnography as a means of explaining and interpreting the changes underway within religious institutions and community, and of the role and influence of leadership as initiators of change.

Orthodoxy & Secularization

Redeemer Presbyterian Church shows us that secularization, though prevailing is not linear – churches may become more or less accommodative – more or less secular.[259] The members of Redeemer Presbyterian Church have overcome the modern and postmodern "implausibility" of belief in God and committed themselves to God and to

[259] Neitz, *Charisma and Community*, 258.

one another. Religious orthodoxy coexists alongside of secularization. Religious orthodoxy is possible, may even thrive, in a complex, even secular city like New York. The non-linear nature of orthodoxy and secularization, however, mean that resolution to secularization is limited – that is, it is particular to its context.

Resolution

When Christian orthodoxy survives, it does so in the same ways it always has – through its message and community. Specifically, orthodoxy persists as the message and worship of the church unite the past and present in dialogue within the context of lived face to face relationships. The dialogue between tradition and the present context constructs a moral order, but as Stark observes, interpersonal "attachments bind us to the moral order."[260]

Accommodation, despite its utility, erodes orthodoxy and leads the church along a path of conformity to prevailing secular norms. Technique, method and style do very little to advance religious orthodoxy, and may actually work to reinforce secular world views. Orthodoxy survives as its creeds are brought to bear on the present realities and lives of particular people in particular places. Further, orthodoxy is sustained through the worship of the church that, like its message, brings the past and present together in dialogue without succumbing to, mimicking or reinforcing the logic of the secular world. Finally, religious orthodoxy fosters commitment and community and is sustained through community. The absence of commitment and community points to the commodification of orthodoxy, not its persistence. Where Redeemer has sustained religious orthodoxy, it has done so through the content of its message and worship as well as through community.

[260] Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 157.

Ambivalence & Reluctance

Not everyone that attends Redeemer is involved in community; some do not commit. The popularity of Redeemer, particularly the attraction to its message, however, suggests that though societies and communities may become more or less secular, there is a threshold to secularization. Traditional concepts of sin and judgement are attractive to those who attend Redeemer. "Sinners" may be in "denial," but those who attend Redeemer are willing to hear of their sin and their denial week after week. Most who attend Redeemer do so regularly. Though they are willing to listen to sermons that speak of sin, denial, judgement, wrath, love and acceptance many do not take steps of commitment; in the end, they remain ambivalent and aloof. Despite apparent interest in "meaning" as it is found within the creeds of orthodoxy, the non-committal remain unwilling to pay the price for such meaning. They thirst for meaning, but refuse its terms – a renewal of the sacred world rooted in transcendent authority and revelation that constrains commitment and surrender.

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