

The Geneva School

Resurrection Takes Practice

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by

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Exordium

Hans Christian Andersen tells the fairy tale of a little girl, Gerda, who must rescue her friend, Kay, from the palace of the Snow Queen. One day, Kay and the other boys in the village tie their sleds to passing farm carts to get pulled along. Kay ties his sled to a big sled which pulls him faster and faster away from the village, even as he tries to free it. Andersen writes, “He was very frightened and he wanted to say his prayers, but he could only remember the multiplication tables.”¹ We get the irony of this line—a little boy frightened and only able to remember two times two is four!—and we may even laugh a little.

But what if I told you that American Christians today are in much the same situation as little Kay? Kay could remember his multiplication tables because he was part of a community—a school—with the shared practice of reciting the multiplication tables. While the multiplication tables might not be the first thing to come to mind, we Americans have internalized many analogous things—things like the starting lineups of every football team, lyrics to every popular song, the names of every famous actor, slogans and jingles from TV advertisements. How do we know these things? We know them because they are part of the shared experience of secular America. In this way, we are like Kay: we have been formed to remember our multiplication tables but not our prayers.

Narratio

Christianity is declining in America. Church attendance is falling, the number of those who even identify as Christian is plummeting, and the numbers of the religiously unaffiliated, the “nones,” is rising.² More important than the mere fact that Christianity is declining in America is

¹ Hans Christian Andersen, “The Snow Queen,” In *Andersen’s Fairy Tales* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Inc., 1945), 115.

² “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

the reason people are leaving the faith. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, about 36% of those who identify as religiously unaffiliated say they no longer believe because they were “disenchanted;” in other words, they have lost the beliefs passed on to them by their parents.³ Another 10% are inactive believers, meaning they are “too busy” or “non-practicing.”⁴ Regarding this last statistic, it seems that Christians cannot even agree on what Christianity *is*. From one angle, “inactive believers” would hardly seem Christian at all. American Christianity is in crisis, and what are we to do?

Christian leaders and thinkers from various fields have been wrestling with what is to be done about American Christianity’s decline. Some argue that we teach more. Others contend that we should make our churches more “relevant” to the surrounding culture. Another idea is for Christians to build their own tight-knit communities, separated from the world around them. While all of these ideas are aimed at preventing the decline of Christianity, nevertheless, none of them quite solves the problem. In order to find a solution, we must first understand what the Church, and what Christianity, actually is. Then, we must consider how people have viewed the nature of humanity since the Early Church.

I will be describing Christianity, or the Church, as a *polis*. Originally used to describe the Ancient Greek city-state, the *polis* was understood as the site of formation towards some end or purpose, in the case of Ancient Greece, the “supreme good of man, his moral and intellectual life.”⁵ Christianity also claims to form human beings towards their ultimate end of the Beatific Vision (seeing God face to face). Therefore, the Church, the community of believers, is a *polis*. In an interview with Ken Myers (founder of Mars Hill Audio), Mr. Myers said the phrase “the

³ Michael Lipka, “Why America’s ‘Nones’ Left Religion Behind,” Pew Research Center, August 24, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>.

⁴ Lipka, “America’s ‘Nones’ Left Religion”

⁵ Ken Myers, interview by author, March 7, 2023.

Church as *polis*” means that “The Church is *the* people. The work of Christ was to create a new people, not alongside all the other people, but to create a new people which would be the fulfillment of what human beings should be.”⁶ The Church, then, is the true *polis* because it is where human beings find their true end—the ultimate goal of the Beatific Vision, according to St. Thomas Aquinas.⁷

To consider how people have viewed the nature of humanity, let us first go back nearly a thousand years before Aquinas, to the time of St. Augustine. Augustine wrote the *City of God* in the early fifth century partially to discuss the issue of the Christian’s relationship to the outside culture. He wrote of two cities, the “City of God” and the “City of Man.” Robert Louis Wilken explains that “what a community loves makes it the kind of community it is,” and thus, the City of God is a community united in its love of God and the City of Man a community united in its love of earthly good.⁸ Early Christians understood, just as Augustine did, that “a person is what one loves,” and that their community reflected what it loved.⁹

You may wonder then, why do many American Christians understand human beings to be primarily “thinking things?”¹⁰ A partial answer is found in the Enlightenment, the historical and philosophical context in which the United States was founded. More than a millennium after Augustine, the ideas taken for granted for the past thirteen hundred years were suddenly being challenged. Christians of the Middle Ages who came after Augustine took for granted that human beings are shaped by their loves, but the Enlightenment, the so-called “Age of Reason”

⁶ Myers, interview.

⁷ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Image Books, 1993), 412-422.

⁸ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 206.

⁹ Wilken, *Spirit*, 206.

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2016), 7.

initiated a “decisive break with the Christian legacy of the West.”¹¹ Various Enlightenment philosophers assumed that human beings are primarily thinkers, as René Descartes famously declared in his seventeenth century *Discourse on Method*, “Cogito ergo sum,” or “I think, therefore I am.” The way people thought about human nature had changed—no longer were they primarily lovers, but thinkers.

This change in thought was reflected in the cultural and philosophical foundation of the United States, as the American Founding Fathers sought to create a system of government based on the rational ideas of the Enlightenment. However, they still recognized religion to be important because of the reality that religion *was* important to most people in America at the time. Creating a place for all religions and all denominations of Christianity to coexist meant that the religions themselves had to compromise. In a sense, they had to be reduced to beliefs, to ideas to be accepted or rejected. Stanley Hauerwas explains in his book *After Christendom?* that “by guaranteeing free exercise of religions, [the Founding Fathers] would make religions private and subordinate.”¹² Thus, Christianity became merely an idea, a set of beliefs, a worldview, private and never infringing on the private beliefs of another.

Later in American history, many were left faithless and disenchanting after two world wars. Rod Dreher, a journalist who has written much on this subject, says that “the horrors of the two world wars severely damaged faith in the gods of reason and progress and in the God of Christianity. With the growth of technology and mass consumer society, people began to pay more attention to themselves and to fulfilling their individual desires.”¹³ A culture “built on a cult

¹¹ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 35.

¹² Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 30.

¹³ Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 46.

of desire” thus began.¹⁴ Contemporary America is much the same: we too “exalt the desiring individual,” and “following your heart” is the most important thing to our culture.¹⁵

So it seems that we find ourselves back at the beginning. Ancients and medievals understood human beings to be lovers, while Enlightenment thinkers understood human beings to be thinkers. In our age, we once again realize that human beings are lovers. The world knows we are. It insists that we can and should follow our hearts, and that we find fulfillment in the satisfaction of our own disordered, individual desires. The world around us wants us to be shaped a certain way (although to no end) because it recognizes we *are* what we love. In this context, how can Christians expect to bring Christ to the world when many Christians seem to think we are intellectual creatures, defined primarily by our beliefs, and the world seems to think we are desiring creatures? How can we keep from being formed by the world when there is nothing else forming us?

Partitio

Christians should be part of an embodied, formative Church in order to bring Christ to the world. This reflects the nature of humanity and historical tradition. Ultimately, this could prevent the death of Christianity in the United States.

Confirmatio

To begin, human nature has always been the same. As many great Christian theologians throughout history have observed, human beings are fundamentally “loving” creatures. In Dante’s *Purgatory*, Virgil explains to Dante that love—for which the soul is created—is a “motion spiritual,” that the soul cannot find its rest “till its loved object enjoy entire.”¹⁶ Much

¹⁴ Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 43.

¹⁵ Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 44.

¹⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy II: Purgatory*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penguin Classics, 1955), 205-206.

earlier and more famously, Augustine put it similarly: “Our heart is restless until it rests in thee [in God].”¹⁷ Notice that Augustine didn’t say our *mind* is restless. It is our heart that is restless. Christians of all ages have acknowledged that human beings are desiring creatures, and as I mentioned before, the Enlightenment shook this assumption. Philosophers claimed that the nature of humanity was different than people had believed for the past few millennia.

Christians must once again recognize that we are not defined primarily by our beliefs, but by our loves, and that our loves ought ultimately to be directed towards God because that is the only place they will find rest. Philosopher James K. A. Smith argues in his book *You Are What You Love* that humans are not primarily “thinking things,” but “first and foremost lovers,” and that “you are defined not by what you know but by what you desire.”¹⁸ Echoing ancient tradition that has both Christian and non-Christian roots, Smith writes that we form habits, which shape our loves, which in turn shape the way we live our lives. In other words, what you love shapes what you believe, which shapes what you do, which in turn shapes what you love. And the reality is that you and I are not going to love *nothing*. To adapt what C. S. Lewis wrote about reading, “If you don’t read good books, you will read bad ones.”¹⁹ If you don’t love what is good, you will love what is evil.

Smith points out that the things we physically do have an effect on our habits, forming our loves and eventually shaping us into certain kinds of people. Think of a simple habit, such as having a family dinner every night. This physical habit of sitting down to eat with your family rather than, say, communicating the events of the day through text message, shapes your love toward your family. Over time, regular family dinner helps you recognize the importance of your

¹⁷ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁸ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 7.

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1949), 52.

family and helps you to properly love it through an embodied habit. Whatever we do intentionally and regularly will shape our loves. Thus, Christians should focus more on forming their loves and directing them towards God.

In order to do this, Christians should follow the formative, historical tradition of the Church. First, we must understand that the Church is an actual community of believers. Christians are often tempted to think of Christianity gnostically, and by that I mean that we have a “tendency to believe and act as if faith and salvation were essentially private, acultural and ahistorical,” as Christian author Rodney Clapp puts it.²⁰ It seems we think of Christianity as being primarily a private belief, with church as almost an after-thought to our personal faith. However, this is not what St. Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ,” and “If all were a single member, where would the body be?” And again, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”²¹ We are part of the *body* of Christ, not *merely* individual members, for parts of the body cannot exist independently of the rest of the body. Rodney Clapp says something similar in his book *A Peculiar People*: “The gospel of Jesus Christ is about the salvation not of monadic, isolated individuals but of the world, of the entire groaning creation.”²² Christians are saved within and through the body of Christ, the Church.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas adds that “salvation is a political alternative that the world cannot know apart from the existence of a concrete people called the church.”²³ The Church is a “political alternative” in the sense that it is an alternate *polis*, with an alternate *culture*.

Remember that Gentiles have been “grafted” into the tree, into the body.²⁴ Paul’s analogy

²⁰ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 34.

²¹ 1 Cor. 12:12, 12:19, 12:27 (ESV).

²² Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 40.

²³ Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 35.

²⁴ Rom. 11 (ESV).

depends on his audience taking for granted that there is a Christian culture that new believers must join. That such a culture is necessary for salvation is not a new idea. In the book of Ephesians St. Paul writes, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”²⁵ We are not mere individuals but citizens, belonging to a culture, a *polis*, the household of God. The reformer John Calvin agrees with St. Cyprian, a third-century bishop, who famously wrote, “No one can have God as Father who does not have the church as Mother.”²⁶ Christians may disagree over what “the Church” is, but most Christians—New Testament writers, early bishops, and sixteenth century reformers—have agreed that one must be part of the body of Christ in order to be a Christian.

Christians need to belong to the Church, in communion with other Christians, in order to rehearse the biblical narrative and to live within the story of which they are a part. Salvation—in and through the Church—is, according to Hauerwas, “the enacted narrative of God’s ongoing care of Israel through the calling of Gentiles into the promised people.”²⁷ Christians need to live in that narrative. But how? The answer is found in one of the most important aspects of the historical Church: liturgy.

Christians need to follow a specific historical liturgy in their churches. I will be using the word “liturgy” in the way that it comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, a word which means, literally, “work of the people.” Alexander Schmemmann expands on this definition, describing liturgy as “an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals.”²⁸ Liturgy involves the rehearsing of the historical

²⁵ Eph. 2: 19-20 (ESV).

²⁶ Tish Harrison Warren, “The Church Is Your Mom,” *Christianity Today*, May 21, 2015, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/may-web-only/church-is-your-mom.html>.

²⁷ Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 37.

²⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988), 25. Quoted in William T. Cavanaugh, “The Liturgies of Church and State,” *Liturgy* 20, no. 1 (2005): 25.

narrative of salvation, and thus must be enacted in the Church in fellowship with other believers. A certain way of speaking and behaving is essential to liturgy as it helps the people “by the remembering or re-presentation of foundational narratives.”²⁹ Liturgies were what people did in the ancient world at civic ceremonies, and the early Christians adopted liturgy because they believed the church to be an alternative “*polis*”; in fact, they considered it “the only true political society.”³⁰ Liturgy brings together both the necessity of formative, embodied practices and the necessity of the Church as a community.

Now, you may be wondering what Christian liturgy actually looks like in practice. The book of Acts gives us the necessary components of liturgy as it describes what New Testament Christians did: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”³¹ Christian liturgy includes simply teaching, fellowship, Eucharist, and prayer. These are what Christians do together and are “not only work *of* the people but work *for* the people.”³² Christians go to church on Sundays, they pray, they learn, they partake of Communion together, in order to be nourished for the rest of their lives and, in turn, to nourish others. We do not have liturgies just for the sake of doing something, but because they shape the rest of our lives.

Think of other formative practices in your lives that shape the way you live and are intended to form what you love. I think specifically of “civic liturgies,” such as the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, the singing of the National Anthem at a sporting event, even special ceremonies for days such as Independence Day or Veterans Day. Think about each of these practices. We have a certain way of standing, an order of speaking, “sacred” words and actions,

²⁹ Cavanaugh, “Liturgies,” 25.

³⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 40.

³¹ Acts 2:42 (ESV).

³² Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 115.

all done in community with others. These are corporate, public acts whose goal is formation. As one example, listen to Joseph Thompson, a nineteenth-century Protestant Evangelical, describe the necessity of such civic liturgies for preserving an American identity:

By histories, by orations, and by monuments, by sacred graves worthy of national pilgrimages, by memorial parks and statues, by storied pictures in public halls, by legends and mottoes, by commemorative services and martyrdoms, and, above all, by a festival of the Redemption of Liberty, a day of flags and flowers, a day of prayer and thanksgivings, a day of requiem for our heroes—when all that music and ritual and eloquence can provide, shall celebrate the worth and glory of their sacrifice—by such pain-staking [*sic*] regards for the past, wrought into the habits of the people, let us keep ever bright the links of historic continuity that preserve the nation through all changes and ages, ONE.³³

Thompson recognized the shaping power of liturgies and wanted to use American liturgies to form the American person. How much more, then, should we embrace the historic Christian liturgy, in order to form the Christian person? We readily welcome other formative practices—practices that are perhaps forming us not to love God, but to love something else. Liturgies are what we do in order to shape our loves.

Of course, Sunday liturgy is centrally important, but there are other formative practices that can order the rest of our lives around Christ, such as the marking of days and seasons according to an ordered calendar centered on the biblical narrative. The so-called “liturgical calendar” has existed since the Early Church. At first, Early Christians only marked the year with the “Lord’s Day,” but by the mid-second century they had already begun to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ in a yearly festival.³⁴ Christmas was observed by the fourth century, followed shortly by the addition of days set aside for the remembrance of the deaths of martyrs. Our earliest record of a liturgical calendar is from the year 354, in what is known as the

³³ Joseph Thompson. Quoted in Grant Brodrecht, *Our Country: Northern Evangelicals and the Union during the Civil War Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 147.

³⁴ Robert Louis Wilken, “The Church as Culture,” *First Things*, April 2004, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2004/04/the-church-as-culture>

“Chronograph of Rome,” in which we find a list of holidays, deaths of Roman bishops and martyrs, and Christmas all in calendrical order.³⁵

Robert Louis Wilken explains the significance of a liturgical calendar in his essay “The Church as Culture.” He writes, “The liturgical calendar makes religious remembrance habitual and familiar. The repetition of saints’ days and festivals of the Lord is a kind of spiritual metronome helping communal life to move in concord with the mysteries of the faith.”³⁶ The Jews marked important feasts and fasts that centered their lives on God’s narrative. Take, for example, the Passover, in which they remember by a yearly feast how God delivered them from bondage in Egypt. Christians should do similarly with a liturgical calendar.

We should follow the historical, traditional calendar which preserves the specific days and seasons that most orthodox traditions throughout Christian history have agreed upon. The point of the calendar is to have a historical continuity with Christians who have gone before and to direct our entire lives towards God. It helps us truly live within the historical narrative of salvation, and allows us to recognize that the Church is, in fact, an alternative *polis*. We order our days according to the Church, not according to the world, just as we order our loves towards God and not towards the things of this world.

Refutatio

Now, you may think that I am exaggerating or even making up this problem. You might be asking, how could Christianity die in America? The world Christian population is actually *growing*. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015, “the world Christian population is expected to grow from 2.2 billion in 2010 to 2.9 billion in 2050.”³⁷ Such

³⁵ Wilken, “The Church as Culture.”

³⁶ Wilken, “The Church as Culture.”

³⁷ “Christians,” Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/christians/>.

news is encouraging; however, the United States will not necessarily make up a large percentage of that 2.9 billion. There are many places where Christianity was once the basis of the culture where it now hardly exists at all. For example, the very land of Christianity's origin, Palestine, has an almost exclusively Islamic population.³⁸ And in western Europe, which was the center of Western Christianity for centuries, only 22% of the population attends church monthly or more.³⁹ Although Jesus says that the "gates of hell shall not prevail" against the Church, that does not mean that the Church will survive in America.⁴⁰ It is necessary that we create vibrant, orthodox churches to withstand the demise of Christianity in America in order to fulfill our calling to "make disciples of *all* nations," including our own.⁴¹

Some may argue that Christians are called to be "salt and light" to the world, and thus that I am somehow suggesting a retreat from the surrounding culture that betrays such a call. They may argue that we focus too much on this liturgy and way of life inside of our churches and so lose the missional calling of Christianity as we turn inward. In criticizing Rod Dreher's call for Christians to form communities separate from the larger culture, theologian Gerald Schlabach writes, "Withdrawal into self-selected enclaves of the like-minded is hardly a countercultural action in our polarized society. Only by listening hard and differing charitably in face-to-face relationships can we develop practices and virtues in which attention to building up local communities can nurture robust public engagement."⁴² Journalist Emma Green similarly criticizes Dreher in *The Atlantic*, saying that Christianity is on the decline in America, so

³⁸ "Are All Palestinians Muslim?" Institute for Middle East Understanding, December 5, 2005, <https://imeu.org/article/are-all-palestinians-muslim>.

³⁹ "Being Christian in Western Europe," Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>.

⁴⁰ Matt. 18:16 (ESV).

⁴¹ Matt. 28:19 (ESV).

⁴² Gerald W. Schlabach, "The Virtue of Staying Put," *Commonweal Magazine*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/virtue-staying-put>.

Christians must learn to live with people who are different from them—and Dreher is not “ready to live tolerably alongside people with different views.”⁴³

I agree with both of these authors that Christians should not retreat from the world and that we are called to love *all* our neighbors. Christians should be light to the world and witnesses to Jesus Christ, and we cannot simply retreat. However, I am arguing that engagement with the world can only take place after and alongside intentional Christian formation. We live in one of the most educated times and places in history, and yet more and more Americans are abandoning Christianity. This is because the battle against Christianity is not primarily intellectual, but formational. Christians, while able to defend the right ideas, often lack proper formation and are thus unable to be that light to the world. I have argued that Christianity is a *polis*, a site of formation. It is not just a view or a belief; rather, it is the shaping power in our lives directing us to our *telos*, our final end. Of course we must love our neighbors and learn to live alongside them, but we must recognize that we are formed by what we do and that we cannot embrace the acts of the world which are contrary to the teachings and commandments of Christ. The world is trying to form us a certain way, and we must not respond simply with more education or more intellectual debates. We must instead return to the church as the place of formation, shaping us—through the rehearsal of the biblical narrative—to be the people of God we are called to be, so that we can be the light to the world.

Peroratio

That is, after all, the point. We are supposed to be the light, and we are not meant to retreat from the world. We must look to the Church for formation, but then we must take the Church to the world. Practically this means going to Church every week, joining a church with a

⁴³ Emma Green, “The Christian Retreat from Public Life,” *The Atlantic*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/benedict-option/517290/>.

historical liturgy or discussing historical tradition with your church leadership, participating in communion and in the liturgy, being steeped in Scripture by studying it in a group and learning from the sermons on Sundays, ordering your life around traditional feasts and fasts, making church services and community with your church family a priority. And then it means going to work, engaging in conversations, inviting your neighbors to your church, being ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you.⁴⁴

Let us not be like Kay, who was only able to remember the multiplication tables and could not remember his prayers. Let us rather be like the little girl, Gerda, who, when trying to free Kay from the Snow Queen, uttered the Lord's Prayer in the face of great danger, and immediately an army of angels appeared around her.⁴⁵

We American Christians are now faced with a choice. We can continue focusing on intellectual debate and expect a different result. Or we can embrace a formational, liturgical Christianity that is more than merely a set of beliefs and begin to revive Christianity, and change the world.

⁴⁴ 1 Pet. 3:15 (KJV).

⁴⁵ Andersen, "The Snow Queen," 141.

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