

Mainline faith, with passion: Cultural immersion of the good kind

by [Kenneth W. Chalker](#) in the [October 20, 1999](#) issue

Thirteen years ago I became the pastor of a downtown church that had once been a major force in the community. At one time, 2,000 people filled its huge sanctuary on Sunday mornings. Young people from across the metropolitan area flocked to its midweek services, and the pastor's sermons were frequently printed in the newspaper.

But by the time I became pastor, only a few doors were open on Sundays for the parishioners to make their way to the worship space. Visitors were not expected. Outreach programs had long been abandoned.

During the week, the church building was home to a number of social service programs that served indigent senior citizens and street people. The programs probably did some good, but they were operated by an unsupervised and minimal staff. Public funds were misused, money was skimmed from the church endowment fund, and a black-market trade in government food was flourishing.

One morning soon after I arrived at the church I entered the building to meet Betty, a prostitute, who was waiting for me on the inside stairs. She had unbuttoned her blouse and pulled it back. "Reverend, is there anything I can do for you?" It was clear from Betty's question that she did not expect this church or any man with the title "Reverend" to be much different from any other place she frequented or any other person that paid any attention to her.

It is into such a broken world that Christ came. The manner in which he faced that world was revelatory then. The record of it continues to be so. But in this age of megachurch mania and TV evangelism, the essence of Jesus's ministry is sometimes difficult to see. Both the record of that witness and its present form are obscured not only by the electronic sounds of churches trying to be relevant, but by the silence emanating from liberal Protestants.

In some places the liberal, mainline churches are cowed by the contemporary image of "successful" ministry and church growth. In others, a remnant of the mainline talks to itself about programs and issues that could mean a great deal, but are understood by fewer and fewer folks.

I can't imagine, for example, that Christ led one discussion or taught one seminar on catechesis. The people to whom he ministered and with whom he shared ministry did not read scripture. Some may have known certain stories within the tradition, but most of the multitudes who sought him out were disconnected from the religious tradition.

I do not believe that Jesus spent a great deal of time leading organized Bible studies or offering lectures on hermeneutics. While he is said to have opened the minds of his disciples to the scriptures, his canon of scripture was much smaller than the one we argue about now. What canon existed was largely memorized, and known by a very small number of privileged people.

Further, I do not believe that there was much going on in the way of spiritual formation. While people may have hungered for some sense that life mattered and that their lives mattered, most were probably just anxious about surviving. Our stress on spiritual development and on offering people a variety of meaningful programs would not have occurred to most of the those who pressed in to listen to Jesus. Having no concept of rugged individualism and personal rights, they hoped simply that they would not suffer. Rather than questioning God's plan for them, they merely hoped, I suspect, that they might lead a reasonably healthy life, free from wars brought about by petty, self-righteous government and religious officials. Into this land of conquerors, marauders, dissidents, extremists and peasants, Jesus came to minister, enliven and transform.

The mainline tradition knows all this. It can offer a marvelous alternative to the Grand Inquisitor model of Christian thought so prevalent in televangelism. The message we have is more than able to be a balm in Gilead. So why do we cover it up with insider jargon? Why are we cowed into silence or passionless preaching and teaching—allowing the space to be filled with shallow, religious glitz?

Somehow, in the task of faith seeking understanding, we lost the experience of Christ that generated that noble pursuit. We sanctified the process of understanding and allowed the passion to go out of our love affair with Revelation's bridegroom.

We have become a celibate bride.

Jesus transcends the understandings of him which the church has variously proclaimed, enforced and refined. In ministering to and transforming lives, Jesus never took or offered a course in systematic theology. His hermeneutics were absolutely rejected by the certified biblical scholars and theologians of his day. There is scant evidence that he or his disciples grew up in cohesive families that routinely spent quality time in prayer, Bible study and worship. Jesus ran afoul of traditional religious training. He rejected his family and lived an itinerant, communal life, supported, perhaps, by some wealthy women. So much for the icon of male leadership in the family. So much for family values as expressed by those who think following Jesus should make us look like the nuclear families so frequently hailed as the ideal for the faithful.

Mainline Protestantism must make clear the real claim of Christ. Indeed, the only reason that Jesus has been remembered over the centuries is because God chose to raise Jesus from the dead. Jesus lives, and men and women in many diverse cultures and settings have seen him. Their hearts have been set on fire to proclaim that Jesus was crucified, died and was buried, and then, because of God's mighty, singular act, Jesus was seen by some women preparing for a funeral and then by a host of others, then and now.

This is the message of the gathered people who are at once the visible body of Christ and the witnesses to the living presence of Jesus. If Jesus was raised, we who follow his way of love and radical obedience to God will be raised too. Or, as the late Robert Cushman of Duke Divinity School used to say in discussing Christian ethics: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself.' Dismiss the class. There is nothing more to be said."

There is no one approach to carrying out this ministry. What is crucial is not to lose the core message of faith. At the heart of the Reformation and of the reform of the church in every age is an experience with Christ which leads to personal and social transformation.

Mainline churches became mainline because men and women who experienced Jesus converted others and dared to love people. This led them to build hospitals, colleges, orphanages and all kinds of institutions. They spread the gospel through courageous, uplifting deeds that stemmed from faith in a living Lord and spoke to

what was happening in American culture.

We dare not allow this tradition to become a conversation about the historical Jesus or about church-growth strategies. We dare not allow ourselves to be isolated in smaller and smaller circles of influence for private theological discussions.

Such tendencies are all the more troubling when coupled with the contention that the reason mainline Protestantism has declined in numbers and influence is that it has been so closely tied to American culture. As a result, so the argument goes, as the culture was secularized, so were the churches. This argument further suggests that it's the historically marginalized religious groups—those that now have the independent cable stations—that have been best able to respond to the secularization and so they are the ones that are thriving.

This is a troubling point of view. While the Christian faith is not subject to any human culture, a follower of Jesus cannot be in ministry to and within any culture without making the body of Christ flesh and blood within it. Since individual converts to Christ within any culture are going to reflect the way of life that surrounds them, they cannot help but identify with the hopes and aspirations of that culture. Why else would the apostle Paul, for instance, want men and women to support governments and leaders while using familiar forums to encourage everyone to a higher calling? In this sense, I do not know how or why a Christian should not be greatly identified with his or her culture.

Tragedies occur when Christians do not identify with the culture in which they are living. Consider the Christian missionaries who did not identify with the cultures in which they served, and who ended up witnessing not to the risen Christ but to the value of colonial expansion. Or consider the sad case of TV evangelists who lead crusades in Africa and South America and do not think it important to learn the language of the people or know that people's history. So we see the spectacle of North American missionaries giving white-faced Jesus dolls to Mexican children. Unless Christians are willing to be immersed in another culture and identify with it, they should stay home.

Going into the world with the gospel means being in the worlds to which we go. One does not go to Russia and spread evangelical fervor in the name of Jesus as if the Orthodox Church has no part in the body of Christ. Likewise, one does not witness on a street corner in an American city without regard for the cultural and social fabric in

which the ministry exists. Rather than build a "family life center" that seeks to capture the market from secular health clubs and demonstrate "vital ministry," churches had better be involved in homeless shelters, food pantries and child care. The custodial and remedial care of the most broken of persons may well be a divine act of grace and redemption.

Surely we cannot live apart from the culture. Churches cannot be simply a tourist attraction. We cannot be, as so many congregations are, a group of prayer circles and Bible study groups that aren't involved with and have no impact on the culture around them. In this regard, much of what now passes for vision in mainline Protestantism is simply a pious rationale for being ignored.

Our problem is that we do not identify fully enough with the cultures in which we find ourselves. We have allowed churches to become foreign to that culture. The reason our culture has become secularized is because churches abandoned the culture many years ago, not because they became so entwined with it. For instance, mainline churches consciously pulled out of television broadcasting by failing to produce competent, engaging programming when they had the chance. The networks went on without us, and independent organizations with their own satellites and studios took over. We pulled out of the political process, contenting ourselves with how many members of Congress or the state house belonged to our various denominations—and opened the way for a highly focused group which could describe itself as the moral majority.

When we hear politicians talk about churches needing to do more in order to reduce welfare rolls, we can be pretty sure it is expedient talk which panders to the voting power of the Religious Right. We don't hear about how public funds and faith groups can support massive efforts at housing the homeless. The idea that volunteer labor and local congregational financial contributions by themselves can shoulder the task of delivering social service to the tens of thousands of people living in segregated poverty in our urban areas is simply not grounded in reality.

The message that the liberal, mainline Protestant tradition has to share is one we need to be passionate about. We must stop being embarrassed about the experience side of our faith in Christ.

Not long ago a physician in my congregation who directs a free medical clinic examined yet another teenage girl who was pregnant and unmarried. She learned

that the young man who was the biological father of the child was also the biological father of 14 other children, all with different teenage mothers. And he was not yet 20.

Where do we begin the catechesis which speaks to the brokenness that fosters such behavior? Where do we begin to sing the Lord's song and what are the contemporary lyrics? The answers are not easy, but I think they will arise from churches that have a passionate experience of the living Christ and that immerse themselves in the culture and people around them.