



The Year 1968

In the pivotal year of 1968, folksingers Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel produced an album called *Bookends*, in which they sang: “Time it was, and what a time it was . . .” These were the words of the age, the words of a new generation with new ideas, the words of a time pregnant with both promise and disaster but, after which, things would never be the same. As Simon and Garfunkel went on to say, “a time of innocence, a time of confidences.” A few years earlier another group, the Byrds, had sung a paraphrase of Ecclesiastes (“Turn, Turn, Turn”) in which they captured the experience of the age:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the
heaven. . . .
A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

It was such a time.

Scholars debate the question of whether a single event or action or even a single year can be a determinative turning point. Can a single year, like 1968, truly be a pivotal time in human society? Some say “no,” that social and political and economic pressures build up over years, even decades, and it just appears that everything happens at once. Others say “yes,” that certain events and years act as a catalyst, bringing forth a rush toward a new future that could hardly be imagined before. This is a chicken-and-egg debate; one cannot be true without the other, and to ask which came first is entirely nonsensical.

There are always the twin dangers of ignoring the past and romanticizing it. To those who would wish to go back to the way things were before 1968, it is simply not possible, nor, if we think about it much, would we want to. To those who romanticize the age of the hippies and the youth generation, to look back on that age is to shake your head in wonder and disgust; the time was so patently full of awkward naïveté and dangerous delusions (mixed with profound truths) that should be more than quite embarrassing. To those of us who lived through the 1960s, and remember 1968, it was a time, above all, of great bewilderment. For

those who hunger after relevance in the present age, looking back at what was “relevant” or “hip” or “in” at the time of 1968 should cure one of such a single-minded pursuit.

In 1968, American Christianity stood at what would be a high point. Mainline American Protestants had (without knowing it) reached the peak of their numbers and their societal influence. American Roman Catholics were equally stimulated and befuddled by the changes in their church brought about by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). And American evangelicals were starting to come out of their self-imposed internal exile, as in subsequent years the evangelical and Pentecostal revolutions would transform American religious life. Many good Christian leaders and good Christian people honestly and seriously wrestled with the issues of the day: the Vietnam War, civil rights, the environment, the women’s movement, and many others. These, and a number of other issues, caused great introspection and the beginnings of great change and development.

But the search for relevance also caused many churches to lose sight of those parts of their teachings and practices and lives together that were foundational to their traditions. Many neglected the good and solid and important in their collective religious experiences, willing to sell their religious birthrights for the latest “relevant” bowl of porridge that came to be popular (if only for a fleeting moment). Much that was good was lost, and perhaps several generations of Christian youth were thus disconnected from many of the foundational elements of their tradition.

Fifty years later, Western Christianity still struggles with the profound social and religious changes that perhaps had their origins in 1968. Much has been done, much is left to be done, and much was lost, perhaps to be recovered. To put it in the words of the time, the year 1968 was more than just a year, it was a “happening.” Much about it, good, bad, and otherwise, was spontaneous. It is up to us now to consciously think, reflect, and act in ways that will build on the good impulses of that fateful year and to repair the damage that came out of it.

Just a note to our subscribers. As many of you noticed, our last issue, the Winter 2018 issue on confirmation, was out late—perhaps about a month behind our usual. We are very proud of this issue, but it was a complicated one to produce. As well, with the retirement of our longtime editorial staff person, we had to find a new way to have the journal composed and readied for printing, which is now being done through the good people at Fortress Press. This is a very complicated process, and just took a great deal of time to implement (which was not the fault of the people at Fortress Press). Now that we have one “under our belt,” things should be back to (relative) normal! Thanks for your patience. If you have comments or questions about our journal, I’d be very pleased to hear from you.

Mark Granquist, Editor