



Leadership in an Age of the Loss of Transcendence

What does it mean to lead into the future? What does it mean to proclaim God's transcendent reality to a people that are blinded by the materialisms of the present?

In their book *The Churching of America, 1776–2005* Roger Finke and Rodney Stark analyze the growth of Christianity in America, and the reasons that in 250 years organized Christianity in America has steadily grown from meager beginnings to a position of strength. In their summation of this book, they write of the churches that led the way, and gathered in people:

Humans want their religion to be sufficiently potent, vivid, and compelling so that it can offer them rewards of great magnitude. People seek a religion that is capable of miracles and that imparts order and sanity to the human condition.¹

They refer to this as “vivid otherworldliness,” the sense that there is a God and a future that is beyond the here and now.

Some will sneer at this as being old-fashioned, or worse, world denying. These critics will echo the Marxist critique of religion and suggest that what churches really need to do is fix this world, and leave it at that. But “otherworldliness” does not necessarily mean fire and brimstone apocalyptic preaching. It does not necessarily mean

¹ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 282.

withdrawing from the world, or ignoring its problems. But it is, I think, recognizing that there is more to God's world than what we now currently experience. This is a recognition of transcendence, and of the power of God. When a church starts to doubt these two things, it quickly loses the power of its message. You don't have to preach "pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die"—but you do need to proclaim hope in the midst of life, in a God who is greater than this world. The problem with many mainline churches is exactly the above—the loss of this transcendence.

Vivid otherworldliness is not simply a conservative thing. It is possible that liberal or progressive churches could grasp this in powerful ways. It just has not often happened in the modern era. The problem with some mainline churches is that they become so wrapped up with trying to change the world, that their message becomes nothing more. When you can no longer readily differentiate a church's message from that of secular organizations (Sierra Club, ACLU, People for the American Way, etc.) people will ask themselves, "why bother to go to church on Sunday morning." I'm all for changing the world—but how does the church approach this differently and uniquely? Conservative churches are often (rightly) criticized for their legalisms—don't do this or that—all sort of moral rules and legalistic, works righteousness. But I hear the same sort of thing in many progressive congregations—you have to do this or that or another thing to change the world. Humans are prone to works righteousness, be it the conservative or liberal variety.

Where are we now, in 2024? I don't know, and neither does anyone else. Be wary of the prophets on the right or the left who confidently proclaim that they know where American Christianity is headed (and they will sell you their books). If history tells us anything, I am most sure that the confident predications of the trends in American religion will, thirty or fifty years later, be proven inaccurate. But leadership for the future of Christianity in the United States, and in the world, will depend on leaders who proclaim the transcendent power of God and God's work in the lives of their hearers, not in a vague fashion, but reality and power.

So, what is a pastor or religious leader to do? Don't listen to the noise. Center yourself on the theology of the cross, and the hope of God's transcendent grace. Practice proclaiming this in ways that connect with people who have not been to seminary. Learn about

your people and about their lives—their hopes and dreams, fears and struggles. Given them a reason for hope in the God who is more powerful than the things of this world that scare them. Create community wherever you can. Deal realistically with human sinfulness—don't just excuse it or wash it away, but help people see that God has power in repentance and forgiveness that can overcome all. Preach the Word with great thoughtfulness. Lead worship and the sacraments with great care, so that people are touched with their God-given promises of forgiveness and hope. Take care of yourself. And be confident that God blesses you and will always be with you, no matter what comes. ☩

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