

# My Ideal Church

## Reflections of an older historical theologian

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## U.S. Religious Shifts

- The religious shifts in contemporary U.S. society show no signs of slowing.
- In 2019, 14% of all U.S. adults said they never went to church.
- But in 2020, that number jumped to 53%.
- Today it is about 73%.
- Many researchers now say that a lot of people who stopped coming due to Covid-19 are just not coming back...

## Change in Christian Churches

- According to the Gallop National Poll over 72% of U.S. Americans say that religion is losing its influence on the U.S. way of life. But what do they really mean by that?
- Is the ongoing U.S. cultural change bringing a crisis for Christian churches? Everything depends on how one should understand such a “crisis.” Membership is certainly decreasing, especially among younger U.S. Americans

## CRISIS or CHALLENGE

- What some see as crisis I see as a challenge. I ask: what does the proclamation of the Gospel mean in our rapidly changing cultural situation? And a greatly polarized USA.
- For me, the question is whether a person, who is fully integrated into our culture, can be touched by the power and beauty of the Gospel as proclaimed and lived by the Church.

## About LIFE not Doctrines

- **Sometimes people forget what Christianity is all about.**
- **Christian Faith is not about doctrines but about a shared experience and a way of life.**
- **Jesus taught by being with and affirming other people.**
- **JESUS was hardly a doctrinaire authoritarian. Unlike many churchmen.**

There are several qualities I would like to find in the Church

**A Church that is a healthy Christian community**

# A Jesus-Style Community

- **Jesus was not a racist.**
- **He was not a misogynist.**
- **He said nothing about homosexuality.**
  
- **He was prophetic, not just in words but primarily in his ethical behavior, showing acceptance, care, and compassion for all people.**

## A Supportive Community of Friends

- I would begin my response by saying I want a church that is truly a **supportive community of friends**.
- Men and women striving **to live in the spirit of Christ**.
- **Not a doctrinaire, authoritarian institution**.
- **Some institutional structures of course are necessary but they should be understood as provisional. They, along with institutional leaders, should be regularly critiqued and changed.**



- Institutional structures are tools – a means – constructed to help and support Christian communities.
- The innate danger in all institutions is that, if left unchecked, they cease being service-oriented structures...
- And then they become hard-nosed self-serving institutions demanding unquestioned loyalty.
- A kind of institutional idolatry.

## A Healthy Church

- A healthy church affirms the dignity and equality of all men and women, regardless of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.
- It does this not just in official rhetoric and documents but in personal and institutional behavior.
- We need male and female ordained ministers. LGBTQ people should be welcomed in church ministries and employment. Homosexuality is not "intrinsically disordered."

# TRUTH

- An honest and humble church must realize that it does not possess all the truth.
- It has to collaborate with a variety of people in pursuit of the truth.
- It has to acknowledge as well that all church doctrines are time and culture bound.
- Doctrines are provisional and changeable. Some doctrines may have been meaningful in the past but just don't work today. Others evolved more from religious fantasy and folklore. The Assumption?

# QUESTIONS

- A healthy church asks questions and welcomes the questioner.
- Asking questions brings greater self-knowledge, a more realistic life understanding.
- Isaac Newton, for example, asked: “Why does an apple fall from a tree?” and “Why does the moon not fall into the Earth?”
- Asking basic questions starts the processes that lead to historic breakthroughs in human and scientific understanding.

• **IN RELIGION AS WELL.**

# Jesus the Question Man

- Jesus of Nazareth asks in the synoptic gospels:  
“Who do people say that I am?”
- In John 7:19, Jesus asks:  
“Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?”

**And what are your questions and answers you have found?**

## Tolerance and Freedom of Inquiry

- I want a church that stresses and practices tolerance and freedom of inquiry.
- I want a church that realizes that all doctrines, even RCC infallible papal declarations, are time bound.
- I want a church in which all “official teachers” are also humble learners.

## SET TERMS OF OFFICE

- I want a church in which leadership people are elected by the community for set terms of office, like five or ten years.
- They should be regularly evaluated.
- And replaced when their terms of office expire.
- If a bishop knew that he or she would only be bishop for about five years, his or her behavior would be greatly modified.
- Can you imagine what would happen in places like the Archdiocese of New York? Or of course in the Holy See of Rome?

## SIGNS OF THE TIMES

- I want a church in which openness to the signs of the times is a key virtue.
- ... I want a church open to the bigger questions that touch on a contemporary understanding of Jesus Christ and a contemporary understanding and experience of God.
- For many people today the old anthropomorphisms just don't work anymore.
- God is just as much Mother as Father, but much more than that.



## Our Ongoing Challenge

- To ask more questions about contemporary Christian belief and practice.
- To support those who question.
- To explore together, in respectful and earnest dialogue, the complete range of answers.
- More questions will arise of course.