

# WHAT TIME IS IT?<sup>1</sup>

*This is the new challenge . . . [Christians] **are** in the United States now in a way they never have been before. This means they should be in a position to give expression to their faith more vigorously than ever before. But there is the other side of the coin: they **are** the very culture they seek to change. As the Jesuits declared in their 32nd General Congregation: 'We ourselves share the blindness and injustice of our age. We ourselves are in need of evangelization.'*

*Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, S.J.*

## Introduction

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The primary reason why transformation efforts are required today is because the churches North America are facing an entirely different situation than they have ever before experienced. James Russell Lowell, the poet, reminded us that "new occasions teach new duties." Congregations are faced with a "new occasion" today. A brief survey of church history is helpful in analyzing and clarifying our current circumstances as well as illuminating our future mission.

The intent of this survey is not to condemn or dismiss the faithful efforts of church leaders and members in other historical periods. God has been actively present within different forms of the church's structure, within different approaches to ministry, and within the various relationships with the political and cultural forces in each of the periods described below. Yet what was appropriate in a particular period in the past may no longer be appropriate today. A major challenge for your church organization is to distinguish between those positive and enduring aspects of the Christian tradition which must be carried forward and those time-bound and restrictive aspects which must be left behind.

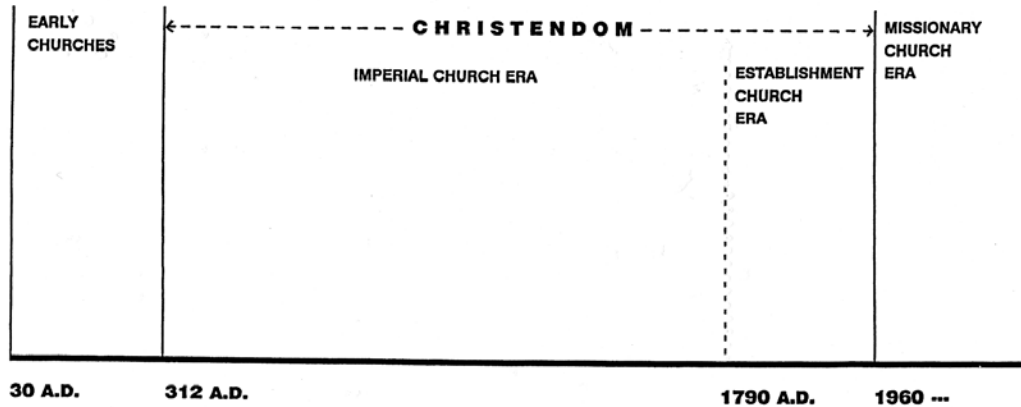
As a community that witnesses to God's mighty deeds, your church organization is continually called to be responsive to the God who is actively present in changing historical situations: "*Behold, I am doing a new thing*" (Isaiah 43:19). No form of the church's structure or ministry will be final until God's kingdom is consummated at the end of history. Thus your church organization is always called to utilize its insight and wisdom to analyze and transform itself as it seeks to be true to its divine calling.

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<sup>1</sup> By Paul Dietterich. See *Transformation* Volume 1, Number 3, fall 1994. The Center for Parish Development.

The history of the Church can be understood in four eras: the Early Churches, the Imperial Church, the Establishment Church, and today's Missionary (or missional) Church.

## WHAT TIME IS IT?



### The Early Churches: 30-311 A.D.

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In its earliest years of life, the church had a distinctive character. Christians, gathering in very small societies, practiced a way of life that put them in sharp contrast to adherents of other religions and to loyal citizens of the Roman Empire. These tiny Christian communities viewed them-selves as a "particular" or "peculiar" community which was called to participate in God's mission in the world. The New Testament idea of "*in* but not *of* the world" characterized the relationship between the early churches and the world around them. Their members lived in obedience to God. Called to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the realm of God, Christians lived inside the norms and values of the reign of God. They practiced the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-9) and other teachings of Jesus. They forgave one another, bore each others' burdens, built-up one another in love, cared for each other. Through the quality of their life together, they demonstrated a different way to be a society. They were a distinctive and unique community.

The very existence of Christian communities carried a missional message to those around them. Intentional efforts were made to spread the gospel into places where it had not yet been heard and to gather people into other Christian communities. But the basic missional strategy of the typical

Christian community was to demonstrate different life commitments and behaviors. A missionary engagement between the church and the world was inherently built into this situation.

The church did not go unnoticed. The political-military-economic-religious establishment of the day viewed the existence of Christian communities as a threat and proceeded to stamp them out. Because Christians refused to worship the pagan gods of the empire, they were accused, among other things, of being "atheists." Over a period of more than two hundred years, the churches experienced waves of persecution. They lived within a hostile environment as a persecuted religious minority. They had no power and influence. They owned little or no property. They existed outside and on the margins of the Roman political and cultural establishment.

The New Testament was written during this period, including the four gospels and the letters of Paul, Peter, and John, which were composed to help the early churches focus on the following areas:

**Memory:** to keep alive the subversive memory of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection,

**Faithfulness:** to remain faithful to their unique calling to be God's people,

**Koinonia:** to live within the norms of the kingdom or reign of God as a new community of love, hope, forgiveness, and peace even in the midst of persecution.

**Witness:** to witness to their faith, hospitably inviting and welcoming others into the Christian community.

All was not perfect within the early churches, as Paul's letters to the church in Corinth make clear. Nonetheless the early churches attempted to demonstrate life inside what Jesus called "the kingdom (reign) of God," and what Paul called "being in Christ."

### The Imperial Church: 312-1789 A.D.

With the ascent of Constantine to the Roman throne in 312, the relationship between the church and the world changed dramatically. Constantine and his fourth century successors, who considered themselves to be Christians, established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman

Empire. Their goal was one empire with one language (Latin), one law (Roman), and one religion (Christianity). By the end of the century, the church was firmly entrenched in a privileged and official position as a powerful agent of the Roman Empire. The era of the "Imperial Church," or "Christendom," had begun.

Life inside the churches changed in striking ways. Where previously tiny Christian communities had demonstrated a sharp contrast between themselves and the world around them, now they lost their distinctiveness. In fact, the church became indistinguishable from the rest of the Roman military-economic-legal-social-political power structure. Public funds flowed to support the church. Before long, the church's power was defined not as the way of the cross but as Roman culture defined it—as the way of status, wealth, worldly "success," coercion, and domination.

The eventual collapse of the Roman Empire led to the development of the Church as the dominant institution that shaped society in Europe for more than a thousand years. During this lengthy period, church leaders pursued several key areas:

**Expansion:** to take the gospel to those places which came under the rule of the Roman Empire (and later, the Holy Roman Empire).

**Domination:** to impose religious patterns of thought and behavior on all persons and cultures within the Holy Roman Empire.

**Alliance:** to maintain a strong alliance with the imperial state.

**Order:** to bring order and stability to an otherwise disorderly and unstable world.

Church leaders were quite effective in achieving these results, even though we now know that the Gospel was compromised in the process.

From the standpoint of Western civilization, this the era produced many positive benefits. Several cherished values—freedom, tolerance, equality, justice, charity—clearly have Christian roots. But from the standpoint of enabling the church to be a reconciling *contrast society*—a faithful and effective manifestation of God's redemptive rule in Jesus Christ—the effects of the Imperial Church have contributed to the distortion of the church's mission and message.

- Where previously it had been illegal to be a Christian, now it became illegal *not* to be a Christian.
- People were baptized at swordpoint with no instruction in the Christian faith.
- The formerly persecuted Christians became the persecutors of others who in conscience did not conform to the Imperial edicts.
- Wherever the Roman armies went, people were coerced into being baptized into Christianity.
- This led to a church of *belongers* but not necessarily of *believers*, since few people were provided with the kind of instruction that would enable them to understand, make a commitment to, and live the gospel.
- Some popes and bishops acted more like political leaders than spiritual leaders.
- Clergy became the agents of the Empire, conducting the census, and performing some legal functions.
- Bishops in northern Europe, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had their own police forces, armies, and entire legal and economic systems, in addition to their church systems.

The church became coopted by political, military, and economic values and it lost its way. At different points during this era, monastic and other movements for the renewal of the church came into being, but most of these were isolated and had only limited effects.

During this time clergy accompanied European traders, explorers, colonists, and armies as European expansionism occurred in the Western Hemisphere, Africa, China, India, and other lands. Missionary religious orders were created whose goal was to evangelize the world. Foreign “missions” became a program of the church. Unfortunately, all too often Christianity became confused in the minds of the missionaries with European culture, therefore European expressions of the church as well as European political and economic systems were imposed on the peoples in these other cultures.

### The Establishment Church: 1789-1960 A.D.

With the North American experiments in democracy, the church became officially separated (*de jure*) from the state in both Canada and the United States. But informally (*de facto*) the church remained wedded to the political-military-industrial-economic-legal-social establishment. Although

North American societies were nourished in their roots by Christian perspectives and commitments, as these societies became increasingly secular and religiously plural, they forgot and lost the critical, challenging, and transforming aspects of this tradition.

- While public money no longer supported the church, it was assumed that religion would continue to provide the overarching moral values which would undergird social integration and cohesion.
- While political leaders no longer named church leaders (nor did church leaders name political leaders), political leaders were expected to be church members and church leaders were expected to provide support and moral guidance for political leaders.
- A subtle shift occurred in church-state relations. While no longer officially tied to the State, "mainline" Protestant church bodies clearly played a role and had a stake in the continued success of the political-military-economic-legal-social Establishment. Other church bodies, especially Catholics, were kept on the fringes of religious and political influence for nearly a century -- where they developed other ways of defining and living out the Christian faith and, as in Boston and other cities, learned how to become politically powerful.
- Political leaders, by and large, continued to look upon the main-stream churches as an arm or extension of the state -- when it suited their purposes. Church leaders, in return, continued to expect their ministry and mission concerns and goals to be carried out in conjunction with and frequently by governmental, military, economic, legal, and social institutions.
- There was an informal pressure to join "the church of your choice." In many communities, people who were not church members were considered not quite morally or socially correct.
- Most church members during this period suffered from a confused identity. They did not know whether they were Christians who happened to be Americans (with an emphasis on their *Christian* identity), or Americans who happened to be Christians (with an emphasis on their *national* identity).

Slowly but surely during this era, North America became more pluralistic. Secularism and relativism increased. The church became relegated by the culture's frame of understanding to the private world of personal values, beliefs, and opinions. North American churches for the most part willingly accommodated themselves to that relegation and became privatized voluntary associations for perpetuating their respective sets of faith opinions.

Their energies turned to institutional maintenance and institutional growth. By the 1950s, large numbers of clergy and congregations were organizing their work and seeking results in the following categories as congregations more and more became vendors of specialized religious programs and services:

- Preaching:** to provide quality sermons that help people apply the Gospel to their personal lives.
- Teaching:** to nurture people in scripture, tradition, and the Christian life.
- Counseling:** to provide supportive pastoral care and counseling, especially in times of personal and family crisis.
- Membership:** to enlist, instruct, and receive new members into the church.
- Administering:** to provide for effective church planning, organizing, staffing, coordinating, and evaluating.
- Programming:** to provide a quality program for all ages, usually with special emphasis upon youth.

### The Missional Church: 1960--

Historians and other scholars tell us that the cultural and political "dis-establishment" of the churches in Europe and North America arose from the confluence of seven major cultural forces, including the churches' own responses, spanning several centuries and coming to fruition in Europe in the 1950s and in North America in the early 1960s. While the following discussion does not do them justice, it will remind us of the "big picture" facing the churches today.

(1) *The Renaissance.* This intellectual and cultural movement redirected people's attention from God and the kingdom of heaven to humans and humanity's progress in this world. It gave people another option than just the Church's worldview for understanding life and the world. It thereby introduced pluralism and a new source of doubt to western minds. It created the cultural soil out of which humanism eventually emerged as a major competitor to Christian truth claims and ethics.

(2) *The Reformation.* From the time of Constantine in the fourth century, it was assumed that the unity of religion was indispensable as the foundation of the unity of society. In the wake of the confessional wars that shattered Europe for more than a century after the Reformation, "the contesting and mutually exclusive claims of the confessional churches had to be reduced to a matter of only private concern, lest they would continue to disrupt the social system."<sup>23</sup> Christian faith became, for most people, a private and domestic matter strictly separated from the public worlds of politics and economics. The Church's attention turned away from "managing society" to "institutional renewal, reorganization, and theological matters."

(3) *The Rise of Nationalism.* Independent nations arose in what had once been a comparatively united Europe. Nationalism swept across Europe beginning in the sixteenth century and undercut the understanding of a common humanity that had previously prevailed. Nationalism led to unprecedented warfare among the peoples of Europe, including two world wars in this century. The experience of modern war induced disillusionment and doubts about human institutions, including the Church, since those wars pitted Christians against Christians.

(4) *The Rise of Science.* The rise of science challenged the Church's prescientific assumptions about the universe and human life. The structure of the solar system, the theory of gravity, the theory of evolution, all called into question the Church's traditional interpretation of creation and the providence of God. A contrast and separation was established between the "natural" and the "supernatural." Only those insights gained through the five senses could be termed really "true." No statements were to be taken for granted without systematic, empirical, and rational evidence. The secrets of nature and of

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<sup>3</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg. *Human Nature, Election, and History*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977, p. 104.

history were to be uncovered through scientific investigation, not by discerning the creative and dynamic activity of God.

(5) *The Enlightenment.* The philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Locke) build upon the scientific approach to change radically our understanding of the external world and of the character and destiny of human beings. They assumed that human beings are intrinsically good and reasonable, that morality and society could be based on reason alone, and that science, technology, and education would deliver inevitable progress. While not intended to be unreligious, the Enlightenment encouraged doubt about Christian beliefs. Through rational investigation, the autonomous human mind could discover the meaning and purpose of human life. Autonomy became the goal and meaning of human identity.

(6) *Urbanization.* The Industrial Revolution initiated the demise of a rural agriculture-based society. In the eighteenth century, Great Britain became the world's first urban country, but other European nations were not far behind. In the United States, only 20% of the population was urban in 1870 but today it is close to 90%. Urbanization has encouraged isolation from family and community, an emphasis on individual initiative and achievement, primary trust in human plans and accomplishments, and the separation of persons from interaction with and appreciation of the basic elements of creation.

## The Response of the Churches

The churches did not respond well to these six forces. In fact, in most cases, the churches placed their trust in past structures and achievements, rather than being open to the living activity of God. They most often sought safety and security by trying to maintain the status quo. By not interacting in a critical yet constructive manner with these historical and cultural movements, they responded in ways that undermined their credibility and distanced people from their life, wisdom, and witness.

The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, attempted to block the scientific search for knowledge. It prohibited Leonardo from studying cadavers to understand human anatomy. It banned Copernicus' books for 200 years. It forced Galileo to disown his discoveries in astronomy. Throughout Catholic Europe, and throughout the Orthodox east as well, the Roman Catholic Church sided with monarchs and money against progress, democracy, and justice. Still today some church bodies, Protestant, Catholic, and

Orthodox alike, in East and West Europe and in North America continue to fight a reactionary war against science.

Protestant churches became inordinately identified with nationalism and contributed to the policies and practices that separated people from people and led to conflicts and wars. Few people in the West have reason to associate Protestant Christianity with the "Prince of Peace." In addition, the Protestant churches especially have been reluctant to accept or even perceive urban challenges, fleeing cities and failing to reach out to urban working people.

Observing this pattern of church behavior, Bertrand Russell commented, "The churches, everywhere, opposed for as long as they could, practically every innovation that made for an increase of happiness and knowledge here on earth."<sup>4</sup> The response to these cultural and social forces by the church has contributed to the rejection of the church by many people who experience it as irrelevant at best and oppressive at worst.

The process of disestablishment, having developed over several centuries, arrived in Europe in the 1940s and in North America in the 1960s. What caught most attention was the diminishing of participation in churches. There were many other indicators of disestablishment as the churches now find themselves in circumstances very different than they have previously known:

- It is no longer necessary to be a church member of one of the mainstream Establishment churches to get ahead.
- Sunday is no longer a day set apart from commercial activities -- it is no longer the church's day.
- People have more choices than ever before, including the choice not to belong to a church; in fact, the fastest growing body in the United States is made up of church dropouts.
- The former Establishment denominations have experienced an unrelenting pattern of shrinking and aging membership.

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<sup>4</sup> See David Edwards. *The Futures of Christianity*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987, p. 295.

- The former Establishment churches have experienced declining influence in the political-military-economic-social-legal spheres.
- The quality of male persons entering theological seminaries has diminished, as indicated by their scores on the Graduate Record Exam, while entering females students score at the same high levels that men formerly achieved.
- In the Roman Catholic Church, the number of priests is diminishing dramatically while large numbers of Catholics are staying away from their church. Mass attendance dropped from 76% in 1966 to 40% in 1976 and continues to decline.
- The leadership of the mainstream churches are challenging many Establishment cultural values, policies, and commitments. Some of their initiatives are being embraced by rank and file members, while others criticize the church for getting involved in "political" rather than "religious" affairs. Divisions between "liberals" and "conservatives" continue to arise within as well as among religious bodies.
- Former so-called "fringe" religious bodies, such as the evangelical and fundamentalist churches, have moved into prominence. In some cases they assume the very position the Establishment churches have been rejecting by forming coalitions with political leaders. In other cases, acting like the Imperial Church of old, they actively attempt to impose their spiritual and biblical values, narrowly defined, upon the larger society as well as within a committed faith community.
- The religious landscape, that had been dominated by the Protestant Establishment Churches for two centuries, is now highly competitive. Churches are competing with each other, with the "leisure society," with new secular norms and standards, for people's commitment, time, and money.
- In some denominations, "church growth" and other "effectiveness" movements have come into being. These voices tend to operate from a North American cultural "success" orientation (a *theology of glory* rather than a *theology of the cross*). They define success in cultural terms as "bigger, better, more." Their goal appears to be to restore the

churches to their former privileged status, size, and influence as in the Establishment Church era.

- Other voices, viewing the pattern of declining participation as an opportunity, are wondering if what Constantine would have called "decrease" might be Christ's way of "increase."

## An Opportunity

Today, both Catholic and mainstream Protestant church bodies are confronted by a new disestablished situation. This provides them with a new opportunity. For the first time in sixteen hundred years, the churches have the possibility once again of being a unique society—freed from bondage to the Establishment.

This is a unique moment in the history of the church, when the churches have the opportunity to:

- break out of old patterns of thought and action inherited from the Imperial Church and Establishment Church eras.
- become a church of "believers" rather than primarily a church of "belongers."
- become, in the quality of each congregation's or church agency's internal life and public witness, more faithful expressions of life within the reign of God.
- become "missional communities" in the same sense as the early churches - - "contrast societies"—dynamic flocks here and there that, by forming communities of forgiveness, confession, and reconciliation, by proclaiming in their life and practice God's holiness, mercy, and justice, and by witnessing in word and deed to the world the transforming power of God's love and grace for the whole of humanity, actually demonstrate a different way to be a society.

This opportunity may not come again. How your congregation, church agency, or other church body, responds to this unique time in history is crucial to its future. If your church body does nothing, maintaining "business as usual," it will continue to operate on the basis of outmoded ways of thinking and behaving. If it seizes this moment in history and interprets it as "opportunity" rather than as "problem," your church body will be able to play a role in building a new kind of church for a new kind of world.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

Why is it so important to know what time is it?

What makes this moment in history so important?

What is the opportunity for your church?

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