

Talk Two: Will this Church have Children?

by Robert Sweetman

This is the second of two addresses by Bob Sweetman given at the ICS Worldview Conference titled "Another Brick in the Wall" on September 27, 2008 in Oakville, Ontario, Canada.

My interest in the church as institution emerges from reflecting on the differences between my and my children's socialization to spiritual life and belonging. I had grown up in a home in which the life of faith was spoken of as a life of gratitude for redemption freely given. It was a sense of Christian living that flowed from John Calvin's own often reiterated conviction. On the other hand, my home existed within a social environment in which Christian identity and a narrowly American suburban social ideal were so closely associated that to reject the ideal was tantamount to rejecting Christian identity. That identity was reinforced by complex and unarticulated forms of coercion in what were spoken of as the three legs of the communal stool: home, church and Christian day school. In addition, my ecclesiastical subculture owed much to the Reformed experience in the Netherlands, and hence to thinking of Reformed people as an ideological community centered around the church and a number of para-church organizations that gave definition to the community as a distinct society within the American melting pot. I took the coercive force of these institutions for granted. I resented it intermittently but I accepted coercive forces within home, church and school; they had their role to play in healthy social formation.

My children grow up in a very different world. The Reformed community and institutions of their experience are small and scattered. Their coercive force is negligible. The Reformed institutions of their experience weigh lightly upon their young shoulders. What is fascinating to me, however, is that my children do not experience institutional life in anything like the complacent if complaining way that I did at their age. Rather, I have noted something quite peculiar about their experience of church in particular. When my children speak in the abstract about the Christian church they speak in terms that closely resemble the ambivalent and slightly disapproving way that our North American media speak about it. It is clear that they are thinking of the Christian Right of American politics or the Roman Catholic Church in its opposition to birth control or to a married clergy. When my children speak about their immediate worship community they speak of its members individually and almost always in positive or at least amused tones. If they ever speak of that community as a church or institution, however, the tone shifts back toward abstract, mild disapproval. I summarize the phenomenon this way. Everything they prize about their experience of church is ascribed to the persons they encounter at church. Everything that bothers them about their experience of church they ascribe to church as an institution abstracted from the persons they encounter there. There is a discomfort, a lack of engagement with the institution of the church as they experience it both personally and vicariously in their culture, even though it was responsible for the forging of a number of deeply positive human relationships. One might say that the church as an institution has weighed so lightly that they hardly notice it at all.

What my children's experience suggests is that the church has not been passed by in all of the transformations we spoke about in the morning. But is their experience symptomatic? I cite three widely separate bits of evidence that suggests it is. C.N. de Groot, a Catholic sociologist of religion in The Netherlands has examined the Catholic World Youth Day

phenomenon as it has mushroomed under the charismatic patronage of John Paul II. She notes the tremendous success of these events in forging community among young Catholics. In particular she notes that for Western European Catholic youth, especially, it gives them a palpable sense of belonging to a huge worldwide communion and so transforms the sense of being isolated believers in an overwhelmingly secular context, a description that captures well the feel of their day to day existence back home. She notes that many youth organizations such as Focolare have been established to mediate between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the youth groups on the ground. She notes how central the hierarchy is as sponsor and as participant in the World Youth Day movement. And yet, she observes an ambivalence among ecclesiastical leaders towards the youth and their culture as it is experienced on the ground. She cites, for example, certain words of Benedict XVI (then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger) at the Cologne event (1986).

And so, together with forgetfulness of God there is a kind of new explosion of religion. I have no wish to discredit all the manifestations of this phenomenon. There may be sincere joy in the discovery. But to tell the truth, religion often becomes almost a consumer product. People choose what they like, and some are even able to make a profit from it. But religion sought on a do-it-yourself basis cannot ultimately help us. It may be comfortable, but at times of crisis we are left to ourselves.

De Groot uses a version of our story as told by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to contextualize and give meaning to her remarks. What we have called the move from an age of ideology and ideological struggle to a post-ideological culture, Bauman calls the move from solid to liquid modernity. Solid modernity was an age of stable and self-conscious classes, status boundaries, prescribed identities, predetermined roles in production processes and so on. That is, society was highly differentiated and the differentiations were held to be and to some degree were stable and obvious. Liquid modernity is by contrast a world in which these fixities have disappeared or are quickly disappearing. Society increasingly resembles its consumer economy. The market becomes more powerful than the state, church or family. In such a culture all that we are or might become is a matter for conscious choice. We must choose what to wear, what to do, what to eat, what to believe. Even leading a traditional life, and clinging to a religious tradition must be by choice. It is then a private matter, a piece of our individually constructed identity (De Groot, 2).

The Catholic hierarchy is, even in the post-Vatican II era, a powerful manifestation of solid modernity. World Youth Days by contrast because they are fluid, event-built communities that come together for a time and then disband, are phenomena of liquid modernity. De Groot describes the intersection this way:

Solid church and liquid church seem to be entangled in a complex relationship at the World Youth Days. The institutional church and the various new religious movements it cooperates with, facilitates an event that generates its own dynamics of merchandizing, providing spectacle, and satisfying needs. Youngsters use the event for their own purposes, especially, to meet other young people and to experience a feeling of solidarity and spirituality. . . . [At the same time,] World Youth Days are hardly a public event. Participation is carefully prepared in parishes and youth clubs. . . . The church, however, pays a price for moulding this as an event: the experience

of the event is more appreciated than orthodoxy, the event is regarded as more important than the church, and the church gets involved in a setting it mistrusts (De Groot, 7)

She goes on to say that:

whereas in an earlier phase of modernization the importance of the institution was prescribed, today it is chosen. People's attitude towards institutions has been individualized. The church, as one of the modern institutions, can be understood in this way. In liquid modernity, the institution still exists, but no longer provides a given symbolic universe and social structure for the population of a state, a region or a particular social network. The task of constructing and maintaining a (sacred) world has become a private task. People may choose to make use of this institution [i.e, the church](De Groot, 9)."

The general outline of our story's last chapter seems quite pronounced.

Youth Congregations in England also confirm the last chapter of our story. Listen to the description included in Werner Ustoff's 2006 Chaplaincy Lecture at the University of Leichester.

These youth congregations reject the institutional church and organize themselves through cell-structures, almost along tribal lines, with a network of teams allowing everyone to participate in leadership. Worship is informal, with a strong emphasis on spiritual experience, and, whether in the form of a rock concert or something more meditative, it is highly charged. The membership structure is also informal; you belong when you are there. There are no prerequisites, though it is expected that, over time, members agree with the core beliefs and values. These core beliefs are surprisingly traditional . . . (Ustoff, 10)

Descriptions of the Emergent Church movement in North America reiterate certain of these themes. Here too one sees an emphasis upon meeting people particularly young people where they are at—in bars, movie theatres or malls—using the musical and speech idioms of youth culture and setting few if any conditions upon participants and their participation. The principle seems to be here in North America as among the youth congregations in Britain: You are a participant for as long as and in whatever capacity you choose to be. As a result, institutionalization is kept to a minimum and knows a wide range of local variations.

Fluidity and open-endedness is also marked in the most prominent theological voices of the emergent church movement. Brian McLaren, to name perhaps the most prominent of these figures, weds an expansive curiosity about and exploration of other Christian traditions in his search to find resources to deepen his own warmly evangelical understanding of the example of Jesus, including exploration of those traditions long held in evangelical suspicion, namely Catholicism, Orthodoxy and the theological modernism of mainline Protestantism. I remember thinking as I worked my way through his *A Generous Orthodoxy* that here was an evangelicalism with the windows thrown wide open so as to be blessed by fresh air wafting in from all directions. This kind of openness is scary to many evangelical leaders. There is no lack of finger wagging in response to McLaren's message. Of course, every move carries with it the spectre of danger. His generous orthodoxy is no exception. Generosity could

easily be imagined to name an unprincipled eclecticism that threatens to trade in evangelicalism's orthodox birthright for a mess of pragmatic gleanings that have no consistency or staying power. Yes, I thought that would be what could happen if his generosity were to go to seed, but I didn't get that feeling from him. I wondered, what allowed him to range so widely without mishap.

This is what I think. He is protected by the depth of his evangelical spirituality. It is the shape of his evangelical emphasis upon the Gospel and the person of Jesus of Nazareth, his appropriation of the living heart of the great evangelical motto No-Creed-But-Christ that has guided his exploration of other traditions. He has wanted to know if these other traditions had better names for the conundra we all face in the present than did his own evangelicalism. In particular, he has wanted to know whether other traditions spoke of our shared Savior as he is presented in the Gospels in ways that could enrich his evangelical commitments. As I see him operating, evangelical identity and its needs consistently drives the movement outward toward investigation of other sister traditions.

I do not of course come out of the heart of American evangelicalism. Nor have I been an informed and acute observer of the emergent movement within it. Nevertheless, even I, a medievalist for heaven's sake, have learned just enough to see how well the principle themes and strategies of the emergent church movement and McLaren's voice within it fit with the story we have been examining today. In society at large but especially in its youth culture institutions have become a central problem. And the most creative or colorful responses to this development do not so much assume that problematic institutions need to be reformed as put in question. What is pointed to as problematic in institutions are their fixity, internal coerciveness, militant competitiveness, and universalizing drive—precisely the characteristics of institutions built to serve ideological needs—Pink Floyd's metaphorical bricks in the wall.

Let me recall for you the thesis I articulated this morning: *Our social institutions and habitual arrangements are often ill-fitted to the shape of our present experience. They are habits, practices, and institutions that were forged in a world we increasingly experience as past, to purposes we no longer clearly remember or have learned to feel abashed about.* This thesis I am suggesting is a good place to start to think about how the church is to adjust to the challenges of our changing world.

Such a thesis does not call the legitimacy of institutions per se into question. Rather, it acknowledges the social good of institutions: they preserve hard-won agreements about how to perform necessary functions and so release enormous reserves of energy that would otherwise be spent on negotiating just such agreements. What the thesis says is that the institutions we have inherited from the age of ideology, may well have the wrong form and ethos to realize their social good in the new cultural era.

One could of course draw a more radical conclusion. One could conclude that holdover institutions from the age of ideological struggle are hopeless without denying the good institutions make possible. Many post-ideological people have drawn just this conclusion. Such a view easily slides into a revolutionary posture: we must destroy extant institutions so as to free a space in which to build up new ones better able to serve present needs, as if one

could make a clean break and start over without remainder from problematic past arrangements and habits.

But is such a clean break possible? Doesn't such a radical therapy nearly always involve too much loss of blood? Moreover, isn't it just an old ideological impulse—we can create a clean slate and reason, in the vacuum our destruction has created, about what is abstractly best for us? But here is the thing. Even the revolutionary is forced to work with the ruins of what has been destroyed when rebuilding institutional arrangements.

So my own impulse is to see the need for institutional renewal and to look for a mode of renewal that neither denies its need nor affirms renewal as revolution. What are needed, then, are models of change that do not come from the age of ideology itself. Consider the political culture of late medieval European societies. Reform was on everyone's lips and was indeed ongoing. Reform all knew demanded ceaseless effort. The strategy employed however seems from a modern perspective to be counter-intuitive. Older and malfunctioning institutions were not shut down in order to make room for a reformed institutional practice. Rather, the old institutions were left in place to carry on as if nothing had changed. In addition, however, new institutions were created, charged with identical functions, and ordered to perform those functions differently in the hope of being more effective. Of course, what was created in the process was a bureaucratic muddle, the two institutions competed and worked at cross purposes. Modern historians who study this approach to reform appreciate it not at all; it is inelegant and inefficient. As such, it is irrational and seemingly ineffective. Far better to make a clean break and be done with the old altogether. I think that such a judgment, however, misses the point. I suggest that the point was to experiment with institutional arrangements in the search for practically effective instruments of reform in a context in which a default practice however inadequate continued to be available. Parallel institutions were established to perform the functions of the older institutions in new ways and, if they were successful, their success would be seen and copied, also by the older institutions. In this way, old institutions would be transformed to the model of the new. This way of operating is indeed less rational than we have come to expect. In important ways, however, it is deeply in touch with how we actually create and modify culture. Culture forms around images that strike or resonate in ways that attract sustained communal attention. We all notice their existence and feel compelled to assign them a meaning. They anchor shared or cultural memory. For example we all know well the images of 9-11 towers collapsing, Henderson's winning goal, or JFK's slumping form on a 1963 Dallas street. Exactly what these shared images mean is a matter of dispute but we have all internalized the images and can exegete them in our own way.

Cultural images are images that have staying power. The most elemental of them become indestructible like the myths and fairytales that writers like C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald or J.R.R. Tolkien use so brilliantly to the delight of Christian readers or that Philip Pullman uses to our displeasure. Lines from *The Simpsons* or *South Park* function for people of a certain age similarly. The point is this: cultural images, those with staying power, remain the same across generations or cultural boundaries but what they mean is a matter of constant negotiation. In that respect they are much like institutions. As a result, changes in meaning result from changes in their environment rather than to themselves. I illustrate using the work of Mary Carruthers in her evocative study of monastic meditation *The Craft of Thought*. The Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. celebrates key effects of Lincoln's

presidency: the preservation of the American Union and the freedom of the slaves. Viewed in isolation the effect is one of exalted optimism—behold the progress achieved by this titan of a man. The meaning of the memorial shifts, however, when it is aligned visually with the nearby Vietnam War Memorial and its inscription of the names of those who died fighting on a far-away continent against the emancipation of another people. It is not that the Lincoln Memorial has ceased to speak of the preservation of the American Union and the freedom of the slaves in this new alignment. It is just that the optimism and exaltation of the initial association is transformed by the neo-colonialist folly now visually linked to it.

I think that the medieval pattern of institutional reform then is very like cultural transformation of any age. Parallel institutions are like new images aligned to the old. New images, as we have just seen, if they are successful, change the meaning of the old. Just so, new institutional arrangements pioneered by new institutions, if they are successful, transform the functioning of the old institutions they were designed to challenge. There is muddle associated with such a pattern of institutional change, to be sure, but there is also an enormous gain: precious recognition that all change only has meaning in relation to what stays the same. Of course the opposite is also true: all staying the same is only meaningful in the context of what is changing. Change and staying the same are inextricably linked together and are only meaningful in relation to each other.

This medieval analogy is helpful for understanding changes within our present religious experience. Think of the rapid spread of the “Praise and Worship” movement in North American churches of communions far removed from the movement’s original home among holiness and Pentecostal congregations. “Praise and Worship” has allowed two things to happen in non-charismatic forms of Protestantism: 1) it has allowed worship communities that are concept and language centered to acknowledge the emotions more forthrightly and centrally in worship and devotion, and 2) it has allowed worship communities that have tended as societies to be a gerontocracy and patriarchal to cede leadership roles to its younger generations and its women. Indeed, since “Praise and Worship” style music is the music of the young, or so it is said, it is properly to be entrusted to the young. Moreover, affective worship with its emotional content is something feminine as well as youthful—so the old patriarchal and gerontological logic goes—and hence should be entrusted to women too. In short, success has bred success. An effective experiment has gradually transformed the competition, though the process has often been difficult. Indeed the “Worship Wars” within evangelical and confessional Protestant congregations has often led to two fairly distinct worship communities making up a single congregation sharing the same facilities though worshipping at separate times. One can see the “Worship Wars” within Protestant congregations as an example of the pattern of reform I identified in its medieval and political manifestation: the old pattern continues to exist while the new experiments are set up, and if the new is successful, it comes to transform the old in the image of its success. Indeed, many Protestant congregations, worried about their appeal among young people and viewing the apparent youth appeal of other congregations that have embraced “Praise and Worship,” have transformed their worship habits in imitation of that success. “Praise and Worship” can legitimately be criticized from a number of different angles, but its success must be acknowledged as well as its transformative effects upon worship in churches far from its Pentecostal and holiness heartland.

So the thesis or moral that I am asking us to consider is one that acknowledges both that institutions are necessary, social goods, and that the old institutions of the age of ideological struggle must be transformed to new patterns that correspond more effectively to developing experience of a post-ideological world, but without the sort of revolutionary discontinuity that would destroy rather than transform. This involves 1) seeing what is new in our post-ideological world and 2) experimenting with new institutional forms in hopes of arriving at habits and practices that can be more effective bearers of our shared social good, and 3) while maintaining the older forms as a default position to be abandoned when and only when the new forms have been proven to be superior. The last of these principles is very difficult. If the medieval experience is any guide, it works best when the old and the new are given separate institutional frameworks that are connected enough to interact for the benefit of both. This will never be clean and efficient but human life, real human life, rarely is, notwithstanding the presently expansive use of rational choice theory by our social theorists and policy makers. To return to Brian McLaren for a minute, this is the genial intuition I see operating in his generous orthodoxy. He understands who his is, a Bible and Jesus focused evangelical. But he investigates other traditions with a view to acquiring moments of theology and spirituality that can be grafted onto his evangelical trunk, moments that promise to increase the yield of his evangelistic harvest.

This project of cultural discernment, however, is no easy matter. What in the old needs transformation in light of the new and what in the new needs to be resisted to preserve a central good of the old? I want to say that such questions already point toward a small truth of great value. The move from an age of ideology to a post-ideological world is best understood as a transition from one ambiguous cultural and social ethos to another. Each age has its share of original creational goodness, marred by sin and redolent of redemption. In passing from one era to the next, some things are gained and others are lost. It may be difficult to know how to weight the changes so as to be able to align one's faithful living in accord with the dynamic of redemption in our world. But we are not required to have all the answers. The Christian life is a lot of trial and error. We need to remember that God knows that and takes it into account. Rather, what is required of us all from whatever Christian tradition is that we sift through what we inherit from the old world and what we face in the new with a view to how to live gratefully in the presence of God. That at least does not change. In the knowledge of what God has been willing to do for us and for all his creation, emptying himself so as to enter hell itself in order to lift us up to life in his Presence, how could we not be grateful? I admit the language is parochial; it is the language of my Reformed home, but I count on people of any and all Christian traditions hearing it and knowing what it means in their own contexts.

In the second place, gratitude should be paired with a fearless trust in the redemptive promises of God. This means that we all can do like Brian McLaren. We can all throw open the windows our ecclesial traditions have held closed. We can do so in the conviction that all human traditions, even faith traditions, have much to learn from others not of themselves. It is of course equally true that the capacity to learn takes for granted a learner with a distinct identity. Christians of each tradition need to be able to identify for themselves what they find most beautiful and precious in their traditions. That can serve as the anchor of their identity. And then they need to be fiercely honest in fessing up to the unfinished work in their traditions as well. When the windows are opened and the hunt is on for help, they will look for help from others that will address the unfinished work of their tradition but in a way that

complements or fits with what is most beautiful and precious in the tradition. This will involve a real commitment to discernment and a willingness to make mistakes and let others make mistakes in trust that the Spirit will be at work in such processes of discernment, in the risk of learning from others outside of one's own immediate tradition.

So let me use my own reformational corner of the Reformed tradition as a test case for what I am suggesting. There are three things I find most beautiful and precious in that tradition: 1. its insistence that all of human living in all sectors of life is religious in the sense that it is played out before the face of God and represents our human response to God's call to us to work with God in building a world-made-right; 2. its insistence that the world to be made right is irreducibly complex and that that complexity must be respected if we are to honour the world that God has made and directs providentially; and 3. that our religious response to God embraces all the forms of human society and so rightly takes any and all cultural and institutional forms.

Given these three precious features of the tradition it is obvious I would not counsel the reformationally minded to get out of the institution-building business. Rather, I see enduring value in the tradition's insistence that God's reign is about flourishing human and non-human creaturely life, flesh and blood life enabled institutionally. Indeed it remains an important spiritual discipline in our ongoing attempts to mould our communal living to serve God's coming Kingdom. The challenge is, however, to transform the ethos of the institutions both those on the ground and those yet to be built so that Kingdom building becomes as alluring in the new context as it had been in the old. My own sense is that that means minimally working toward an ethos that is less bruising and coercive, more embracing and responsive, more joyful and less fearful. Maybe the intuitions of Brian McClaren hold an analogy. What is needed is a reformational opening of windows to the resources in fearlessness, in joyfulness, in hospitality to be had among its Christian neighbours past and present to be worked into our institution-building. Such work is already to be seen of course. I can cite a really fine example of this kind of window opening: Gideon Strauss of the Work Research Foundation models a remarkable ability to network with Christians of a wide number of divergent traditions while maintaining a strong sense of his own reformationally Reformed sensibility and framework.

Moreover, a reformational eye for the irreducible complexity should also guide its searches for help from within and beyond its own traditional resources. I conclude with an example drawn from my starting point in this talk: the experience of church I observe in my children and their friends. If you will recall, the older they have gotten the less real the church as institution has become despite an overwhelmingly positive interaction with the people they have encountered in church. It is my hunch that one of the cultural frameworks that is at work here is the present North American paucity of categories used to organize and understand our experience of social realities. Surprisingly large swaths of our society use a simple binary opposition to organize their social world that is particularly useful within a consumer society and so reinforced by it. In this opposition, there is the sphere of obligation like school or work with its virtues of self-sacrifice and austerity and the free sphere of recreation and its concomitant consumption. There is nothing in-between. Moreover, the latter sphere exists to be pursued, whereas the former exists to be escaped. Where does something like church membership fit? On the one hand, it is clearly not recreation with its free and consumptive emphases, certainly not for children and youth. It involves the

qualities of obligation: disciplined silence and stillness that do not come naturally. It involves words unfamiliar to the language of one's ordinary recreational activities and discourses. It involves surveillance and coercion that are the very antipode of recreational activity as our culture understands it. So, church is definitely not recreation. Nor does it quite fit within the framework of obligation, for the language of adult voices they love and admire speak much of freedom-in-Christ and emancipation from sin. The language of freedom is central to church talk. So children and youth are left asking what church is most like, and I think that many many come to decide church is *most like school*. That means that church belongs to the sphere of obligation but in a mitigated way. You see, school is not forever. One graduates and moves on; it is a temporary obligation. There are the keeners of course, the ecclesiastical equivalents of that sighing minority who really do think that high school was the very best years of their lives. Church is in this perspective a temporary obligation most but not all will outgrow.

Clearly, we have to find ways to help our culture imagine a richer and more complex world that has room for considerably more spheres than austere obligation and consumptive recreation. We need to evoke the reality and allure of such a world within ourselves, our children and our neighbors. Such analysis flows from a reformational tradition of philosophical social analysis, but needs supplementation by the church building expertise of sister traditions if it is to contribute to the healthy adaptation of the church institution to life in a post-ideological world. I remind myself hereby to be bold and open the windows wide to what my fellow believers of whatever tradition have to teach me.