

Giving Up On God

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It is easier to discuss declining statistics. I know the PC(USA) tradition best, but this is not a foreign story in other Christian expressions in the United States. I graduated from seminary in 2011, and that year the Presbyterian Church (USA) ordained 341 people, which was down slightly from the highest in recent years of 375 in 2006. Last year, in 2021, it was 156. That's a 59% decline in ordinations to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in fifteen years. That drop in pastoral leaders accompanies the annual membership decline of 50,000 people the denomination endures, leading to realistic predictions that in the mid-2030s, we will cease to exist as an institution.

It is easier to find solutions in the immanent threats to human existence, to declare a prophetic word. Green initiatives, racial justice, movements of greater openness and inclusion to marginalized people, immigration reform, eradicating poverty—left-leaning churches move in these ways. Gun rights, abortion restriction and elimination, male headship, school board fights—these are the immanent efforts on the right. All of these earthly initiatives put the work of the church to measurable and actionable use and avoid the creeping anxieties that lurk behind our human work.

It is difficult to admit when you are the preacher who has invested your life into the calling, whose medical care and retirement benefits are contingent on the thing you don't want to admit remaining true. College tuition is coming after all, so we can't say the ultimate fear out loud, can we?

The crisis I refer to is that no one believes in God anymore. Now, of course, that is hyperbolic. The number is not actually zero. There is still an overwhelming spirituality within the American context. But to define that God in a way other than vague generalities creates many challenges. To confess that a God beyond our imagining has intersected the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and has reclaimed us for love by his death and resurrection is a preposterous claim. To declare that we trust that message because of a collection of books compiled by ancient people over several millennia who silenced the voices of opposition and who used these texts to promote purity and push people to the margins sounds backward at best. The Bible has no understanding of scientific and modern complexities of human existence. The challenge for the preacher, therefore, is how to preach when no one trusts the text you draw wisdom from to reveal a God they have no interest in.

I have observed two coping strategies preachers turn to in order to handle the anxiety that arises from these homiletic challenges. Some adopt an "influencer" model of preaching. A more culturally intelligible and internally motivated spirituality has grown among us. *New York Times* writer David Brooks notes that 29% of Americans believe in astrology, which is a larger percentage than all mainline Protestants.

Witchcraft is growing too, from 8,000 practitioners in 1990 to over 130,000 now. Mindfulness is yet another growing trend—meditation and yoga and other spaces wherein to slow the mind from anxiety.¹ We see a shift from “religion” to CrossFit gyms and Soul Cycle, spaces where a person finds community while he works on himself. All of these options, while sometimes drawing on the mystical, are practiced on *our* terms and are under *our* influence. They are largely individually-driven with a goal of self-improvement, even when that self-improvement comes within a community of people.

Major companies now employ “chaplains” to care for their employees, recognizing the need people have for someone to listen deeply, to care, to offer support. But they do not espouse any doctrine or dogma. In fact, it is yet another way that “work” comes to dominate all of life, for now there is a religious component to the workplace.

These “new expressions” then, blend with a quasi-Christian spirituality that comes in Instagram Influencers, authors, and podcast hosts. Leigh Stein, in a piece for the *New York Times*, compares these influencers to the long-standing tradition of the American evangelist. She includes figures like Glennon Doyle, Brené Brown, and Gwyneth Paltrow as the “non-religious leaders of our era.”

According to Stein, “These women look and sound radically different from conservative evangelical male televangelists like Pat Robertson and Joel Osteen. And while they don’t brand themselves as faith leaders, this is the role they play in many of their secular fans’ lives. The size of their devoted, ecstatic, largely female following shows how many American women are desperate for good vibes, coping skills for modern life, and proactive steps to combat injustice and inequality.”² We baptize self-help culture, and while not promoting a “health and wealth” gospel that overtly declares that life will improve through the “power of positive thinking,” this form of proclamation indeed reflects Norman Vincent Peale in its theological outlook more than it does the biblical witness.

The second homiletical response to this moment of cynicism, skepticism, and nihilism is to make the church a community of tangible action. We have seen this approach take violent forms as many people who label themselves “Christian” support political movements rooted in rigid racial categories, abandon all fruits of the Spirit for the sake of accumulation of power, and elevate their status before ever stooping to wash the feet of their neighbor. These “proud boys” and “oath keepers” have a powerful appeal despite the fact that once again their messages and actions find no grounding in the Gospel of God.

Progressives, while not resorting to violence or the end of democratic governance, are not immune to this emphasis on revolutionary action. While not resorting to violence, they have developed new vocabularies around categories of identity, relationships, racial reflection, and the environment that become a secular creed that must be maintained by all adherents lest they be cast off for failing to keep the dogma. It is a new form of Puritanism. To refuse to tow the line means a person is

"cancelled." Many progressive Christian communities adopt this rhetoric and these crusades, but without theological reflection and biblical grounding, the legalism in the secular creed comes to fuse itself into the faith community and thus the notions of grace, atonement, and forgiveness are abandoned.

Both of these temptations for the preacher, self-help assurance and immanent action for the sake of relevance, come from the unwillingness or inability to see a God beyond our observable reality. I spent the summer of 2022 on a sabbatical project exploring the life of twentieth century theologian Karl Barth and his influence upon American Presbyterian pastor and author Eugene Peterson. As I walked the streets of Basel, read sermons in the alps, stood at the university in Bonn, Germany, and visited Barth's final home that houses his archives, I came to see that the present crisis that "no one believes in God anymore" is yet the latest expression of the conflict between the Natural Theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher and a Barthian approach.

I realized in conversations and reflection that the crisis I saw in the American church is evident in Europe and European theology. My wife Rebecca and I sat at a patio table under the umbrella as the sun began to sink in the Basel sky on a beautiful May evening. We were the guests of Dr. Georg Pfeiderer, the chair of theology at the University of Basel, and Dr. Anne Louise Nielson, a post-doctoral fellow. After the wine was poured and we had raised our glasses and ordered our meal, I asked what Barth's legacy was in theology now in Basel and in the Reformed Church in Switzerland. Dr. Pfeiderer's answer stunned me when he confessed that Barth is not taught that much anymore, that largely theology departments have returned to the theological ideas of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Barth's view of the Bible, his insistence on God being "other" than humanity, his emphasis on revelation from God to humanity being the only means by which we can grasp the divine can make his work appear disconnected from contemporary life. Dr. Pfeiderer expressed that the university continues to emphasize Barth's legacy, but he admits that Barth must be read alongside other theologies. His theology alone is too pietistic, too reliant on faith and not reason.

Again, this surprised me, for Barth was quite critical of the "pietists" of his own day, but I understood the point. Dr. Nielson added that for Barth, everything is answered by faith, and so there is no ability to engage in dialogue with him and other expressions of knowledge, because if there is no faith, the conversation collapses.

Christiane Tietz, in the conclusion of her biography, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*, notes this turning away from Barth in European theology: "In recent years in the German-speaking world there has been an extensive turning away from Barth's theology... In today's era there is a call for a post-Barthianism that once again picks up on the liberal theological projects of the nineteenth century, implying that Barth's theology would offer too few linkages to culture and scholarship."¹⁰

On June 22, 2018 in Princeton, New Jersey, Eric Peterson stood before the annual Barth meeting at Princeton Seminary. He was there because his father's rapidly

declining health would not allow him to attend. Eugene Peterson's memory was failing terribly, he was physically decaying, but in his last year of his life, his very final project was to prepare a lecture for this symposium on the influence of Karl Barth on his work, his pastorate, his writing, and his passion for the word of God. And so in that lecture, he quotes a line from Barth's first sermon to the congregation in Safenwil, Switzerland: "I will not speak to you of God because I happen to be a pastor, but that I am a pastor because I must speak of God if I am to remain true to myself, that is my better self." One hundred seven years after it was first spoken, it was being called upon once more. That old conflict between trust in a God beyond us and the self was revived.

Eugene Peterson drew on that quote because he knew what had become of the church in the past one hundred years, the crisis in which we sit today. He had seen the American church rise to prominence and expose its many failings and sins, falling out of line with the justice, mercy, humility, and grace of Christ. He had witnessed the ever-increasing secularism, materialism, commercialism around us and the ambivalence most people had to any kind of deeply meaningful existence committed to anything other than the next distraction. And so in that same lecture, Peterson writes, "The vocation of pastor has been subverted by strategies of religious entrepreneurs with business plans. Continuity with pastors in times past is virtually non-existent. Men and women who are pastors in America today find that they have entered into a way of life that is in ruins. We are a generation that has to start from scratch to figure out a way to represent and nurture this richly and all-involving way of life of Christ to people who 'knew not Joseph.'"⁴

What, therefore, could the preacher emphasize in this crisis moment? Is there an alternative word, a new word, a powerful word that is not simply endorsing the loudest words we hear in the media or the voices with the most Twitter followers? In the same piece about Instagram Influencers, Leigh Stein reflects on the state of her soul: "I have hardly prayed to God since I was a teenager, but the pandemic has cracked open inside me a profound yearning for reverence, humility, and awe. I have an overdraft on my outrage account. I want moral authority from someone who isn't shilling a memoir or calling out her enemies on social media for clout."⁵

Reverence, humility, and awe, these are not things we find in ourselves. These are not things we "achieve" through the correct practices or following advice. They are gifts, surprises, moments of grace. That grace begins by challenging the notion of trusting in the "self." Barth was worried that the "self" was becoming the new name for our God. He is famously known for saying "You cannot say God by saying Man in a loud voice!"

In one of his early sermons in Safenwil, Barth states, "When we look at ourselves, we have to say we are what the family in which we were born has made us; we are what the education that we enjoyed and the social conditions in which we grew up have made us; we are what good and bad influences have made us – and we

affirm all this as our personal history. . . . In any case, however, when God looks at us, God does not see God's own mirror image, but a stranger, a being that has become completely unlike God. The divine origin in us is concealed, buried, and forgotten."⁶

And this theme does not dissipate over time. For forty years later, he speaks of it again in a sermon to those in the Basel prison: "We cannot believe in ourselves, and we cannot hold on to ourselves. For the harassed, the dark and dangerous world lurks in my own 'proud heart.' In what sense could we then say: 'Nevertheless I am continually with myself?' The Bible calls it sin when man wants to be with himself. Certainly where this is the case, there is no freedom."⁷

Barth saw the elevation of the self as delusion, as a refusal to see the holiness of God and thus to know our need for repentance and forgiveness. The reliance upon ourselves ultimately leads to exhaustion, depression, anxiety, and fear. At worst it leads us into war and prejudice and injustice. Only coming to know who we are in God through Christ can we enter a new way of living in the world.

For Barth this dealt with the atrocities of World War I, the rise of the Bolsheviks, the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche, Darwinian evolution, and unchecked capitalism that leaves workers destitute. Eugene Peterson lived in a different culture in a different era, but in the suburbs of Baltimore, he saw the American culture as one that drove us into consumerism, individualism, segregated living, and destructive competition. The conditions were different, but the threat of trusting in ourselves persisted.

According to Peterson, "The voices that command the largest audiences in our American culture are spokesmen for the ego, sometimes the religious ego, but nevertheless the ego. Deep-rooted, me-first distortions of our humanity have been institutionalized in our economics and sanctioned by our psychologies."⁸

He returns to this theme frequently in his preaching: "In the culture we have grown up in, all of us have been exposed to a good deal of concern that we develop a healthy self-esteem so we can live whole and satisfying lives. In the process, the term *identity crisis* has entered our vocabulary as a key element in self-understanding. Who am I? What does it mean to be me?"⁹

These questions and concepts lead us to higher depression, anxiety about the future, fear of our neighbor, and seeing each other as a threat to our success. The self cannot be trusted.

For both Barth and Peterson, therefore, the new life revealed in Christ and met in the scripture is a radical alternative direction. Dying to the self becomes central to the theologies of both men because the power of the self is the power to destroy. It cannot be rehabilitated or manipulated. In the lived experience of humanity, the "self" destroys. The cross of Jesus reveals this truth, for those with strong self-esteem crucify the Lord of Glory. Only as we die to that self can we welcome the joy, the hope, the fullness, the beauty, the grace that God always freely offered but that our "self" rejects because we want to prove our worth. We want to say "Watch this!" and perform our perfection. We want a resume, a bottom line, an investment port-

folio to replace the grace of God. The cosmic power of self-reliance drives our sin. We must die to it in order to live. This is what Jesus as God reveals. This is what the scripture points out again and again. This is what the embodied community of Jesus is called to do in contemporary lives continuously.

Life, then, comes from God's grace in Christ, and the sermon is the moment of revelation to a community of preaching. Preaching in the crisis of self-assurance, self-reliance, and self-affirmation becomes paramount, for in this moment a truly Good Word might be proclaimed. For Barth the sermon is the place where the Word of God (Jesus Christ) revealed in the written word of God (the Bible) encounters the hearer in a way that they hear the summons, "Follow me!" By the Power of the Holy Spirit, the sermon *becomes* the Word of God addressed to us. There is more power in the preaching moment than in the TikTok video, the podcast release, or the op-ed column.

And the Bible, with all of its flaws and ancient prejudices, is the text from which we hear this word of life. To speak this life-giving word, however, the preacher speaks not about the scripture but through it. Barth understood the power of the scripture beyond the historical-critical method of interpretation he was taught. "The historical-critical method of biblical investigation has its right: it points to a preparation of understanding that is nowhere superfluous," writes the theologian. "Nevertheless, all my attention has been oriented toward seeing through the historical spirit into the spirit of the Bible, which is the eternal spirit."¹⁰ And speaking of the power of the Bible to shape the church, he says, "Again and again, the church has had the experience that God made these texts to be the Word of God, in that through them human beings began to believe. And the church lives from the hope that God will do this again."¹¹

Eugene Peterson takes this form of biblical interpretation and speaks about the Bible as being *livable*: "Everything that is revealed in Jesus and the scriptures, the gospel, is there to be lived by ordinary Christians in ordinary times. This is the supernatural core, a lived resurrection and Holy Spirit core, of the Christian life."¹² Peterson does not speak here as living all the supernatural elements of the Bible at all times, but that the way of Jesus Christ revealed to us in the scriptures is livable by ordinary people today.

Confession of the self to drive us to despair, anxiety, isolation, and violence, assurance and hope that comes from beyond us in the Word of grace that is alive even now — this message of grace and hope possesses incredible power and potency in a moment of cynicism. Reverence, humility, and awe — there is longing for these powers. The preacher stands in the unique space to speak of this power in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The preacher declares the power of the Gospel to save, redeem, and empower human lives. We speak of God not because we are preachers; rather, we are preachers because we *must* speak of God if we are to be true to ourselves, that is our better selves. So speak of God. There are still souls longing to believe.

Notes

- 1 David Brooks, "The Age of Aquarius, All Over Again?" *The New York Times* (New York), June 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/opinion/astrology-occult-millennials.html>.
- 2 Leigh Stein, "The Empty Religions of Instagram," *The New York Times* (New York), March 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/opinion/influencers-glennon-doyle-instagram.html>.
- 3 Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 411.
- 4 Eugene Peterson, "Karl Barth: An Appreciation" (Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, June 20, 2018).
- 5 Leigh Stein, "The Empty Religions of Instagram," *The New York Times* (New York), March 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/opinion/influencers-glennon-doyle-instagram.html>.
- 6 Karl Barth and William Willimon, *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary by William H. Willimon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 42.
- 7 Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 16.
- 8 Eugene Peterson, *As Kingsfishers Catch Fire* (New York: Waterbrook, 2017), 68.
- 9 Eugene Peterson, *As Kingsfishers Catch Fire* (New York: Waterbrook, 2017), 16.
- 10 Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 88-89.
- 11 Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 265.
- 12 Wm Collier, *A Burning in My Bones* (New York: Waterbrook, 2021), 87-88.