

# Losing the Plot: Why isn't Christianity Believable?

Westminster Presbyterian, February 2025

# Dwelling in the Word

Luke 10: 1-12

Where did your attention rest?

What did you hear your partner say?



## Shallow Soil: Disestablishment(s)

Legal Disestablishment. The separation of church and state changed the very ground upon which congregations established themselves and functioned

Cultural Disestablishment. Various shifts in US society loosened the hold/authority of Mainline Protestant denominations

# Cracked Fountain: Voluntarism

Congregational structures in the US require a ready, willing, and equipped volunteer labor force. Voluntarism is/has been a fountain of life for US religious communities

Congregations depend upon and produce associational connections, which have undergone dramatic changes in recent decades



# Out of Breath: Our Secular Age

God has been pushed to the margins in “a world come of age” (Bonhoeffer).



June 8, 1944: “Human beings have learned to manage all important issues by themselves, without recourse to ‘Working hypothesis: God.’ ... In very different forms the Christian apologetic is now moving against this self-confidence. It is trying to persuade this world that has come of age that it cannot live without ‘God’ as its guardian. Even after we have capitulated on all worldly matters, there still remain the so-called ultimate questions - death, guilt - which only ‘God’ can answer, and for which people need God and the church and the pastor” (Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 476-478).

July 22, 1944 (after the failed assassination attempt on Hitler):  
“...one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life” (Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 542).

# Out of Breath: Our Secular Age

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A ‘secular age’ is one in which the ‘background conditions’ (C. Taylor) of belief do not assume or require the God hypothesis.



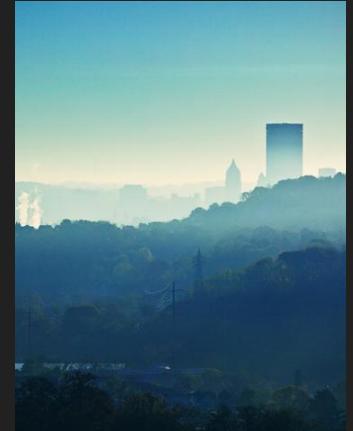
# The Modern Moral Order

A 'flat' social and religious space

The pursuit of one's own well-being by way of economic exchange and the 'long march' of liberative rights

The liberated and disciplined individual establishes her/his identity through increasingly self-referential processes (the "buffered self")

This-worldly flourishing: Life in the 'immanent frame'





“Our sense of being comprehensively in secular time is very much reinforced by the very thick environment of measured time which we have woven around ourselves in our civilization. Our lives are measured and shaped by accurate clock-readings, without which we couldn’t function as we do. This thick environment is both the condition and consequence of our far-reaching attempt to make the best of time, to use it well, not to waste it. It is the condition and consequence of time becoming for us a resource, which we have to make use of wisely and to our advantage ... So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call ‘the immanent frame’ (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 541-42).

# Life in the 'Immanent Frame'

'Beyonders'



Exclusive Humanists

neo-Nietzschean antihumanists

# Foreclosure: Reckoning with Bankruptcy

The institutions and structures of Western 'Christendom' have been unable to accommodate a pluralist world and Christian faith (intellectual and moral bankruptcy)



# Christendom and Mission(s)

“At stake in the expansion of Christianity was not only the salvation of non-Christian peoples (narrowly conceived) but also the dignity and supremacy of the sending tribe or ‘Christian nation.’ As we have seen...the conception of Christianity as a territorial faith also engendered a bifocal vision of the world in which the kingdom of Christ on earth was a visible, self-defined, territorial reality in contradistinction to the ‘heathendom’ or the territories of unbelievers. Since Europe was representative of the church, ‘mission’ involved efforts to spread the gospel in non-European lands” (Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 91).



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## Second *Inter Caetera* of Pope Alexander VI

“...We are informed that lately you were determined to seek and find certain isle and mainlands remote and unknown (and not heretofore found by any other) with the intention of bringing their inhabitants to honor our Redeemer and to profess the Catholic Faith...We greatly commend your godly and laudable purpose in our Lord...to bring the people of said mainlands and isles to the Christian religion...by the authority of Almighty God granted unto us in Saint Peter, and by the office which we bear on earth as Vicar of Christ...we give, grant, assign...all those lands and islands, with their dominions, territories, cities, castles, and other places...and all their belongings to you, your heirs and successors to be lords with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction.” (May 4, 1493)

# Mission(s) and the Subversion of Christendom

“If the Christendom notion of one normative expression of the faith belongs to a passing era, perhaps no concept is more definitive of the new epoch than diversity of forms and expressions. This is so specifically because the globalization of the Christian faith, the crowning achievement of the Western missionary movement, has transformed it not only into a non-Western religion but also into a religion defined by local expressions and marked by cultural plurality. As it turns out, this development restores a biblical ideal that was obscured and subverted by Christendom.” (Hanciles, 111)

# Foreclosure: Reckoning with Bankruptcy

The institutions and structures of Western 'Christendom' have been unable to accommodate a pluralist world and Christian faith (intellectual and moral bankruptcy)

White Protestant institutions and theologies are entangled with White supremacy and ideologies of race/racism (moral and spiritual bankruptcy)





# Bankrupting White Protestantism

According to 2018 data from PRRI, White Christians are more likely than the general population and non-religious people to hold racist views:

“Putting this in plain language, our models reveal that the more racist attitudes a person holds, the more likely he or she is to identify as a white Christian and vice versa.” (Jones, “White Christian America Needs a Moral Awakening” *The Atlantic*, (July 28, 2020)).



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Western Christianity has inherited a “diseased social imagination” that leads to Christian ‘dis-association’ and ‘dis-placement’. This social imagination has its roots in the colonialist/missionary era and has never been adequately disentangled from the faith (W. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*)



“With the emergence of whiteness, identity was calibrated through possession of, not possession by, specific land ... racial agency and especially whiteness rendered unintelligible and unpersuasive any narratives of the collective self that bound identity to geography, to earth, to water, trees, and animals. People would henceforth (and forever) carry their identities on their bodies, without remainder” (Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 59).

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“To enter a new land was to enter a newness that required careful listening to the rhythms of creation played by the indigenous peoples so that the sounds of Christian witness might be joined in harmony (with its proper dissonances) with those rhythms. Moreover, to enter a new land was to touch the skin of a people, joining skin to skin, with the inevitability of being changed, of being transformed, not simply by the people but by creation itself” (Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 114).

Reflect on the four images: Soil, Water, Air, Home. How does your experience map onto or contrast with these images for Protestant Christianity in the US?