

Graduating and Emerging

Matthew 28:16-20

CWZepp, BWCOB, June 1, 2008

Eleven men headed to Galilee from Jerusalem around 30 CE, hoping against hope to find there the man who had become their teacher, friend, and Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified on a Roman cross. They were headed there at the insistence of the two women who had gone to the tomb and claimed they had spoken with an angel and with the risen Jesus himself, both of whom told them to direct the disciples to go to Galilee, where they would see him for themselves. So the remaining eleven disciples set out on their way to Galilee.

We can only guess what they were thinking as they made that journey to the mountain where they were told to go to meet Jesus. Was Jesus really alive? And if so, what did it mean? What if the women were wrong – what if they had imagined the whole thing? And if Jesus was alive, what would they do next? We can only imagine such questions that might have been going through their heads. But I imagine that one thing was certain for them during that journey to Galilee – an awareness that for them, nothing was certain anymore. A recognition that whether they saw Jesus there or not, things could never again be the same. An understanding that they had reached the end of one phase in their life together with Jesus.

Today we are recognizing twelve young adults from our family of faith who will be graduating from high school in the coming week. They join a host of others who have gone before them, and nearly 3 million of their peers who will graduate from high school this year around the country. There will be parties and picnics and pictures (lots and lots of pictures and then more pictures on top of that!). Its all to celebrate the completion of high school careers. But when each one of them walks across that stage or that field, they will also punctuate the ending of their youth.

I see a parallel between the gathering of those disciples who stood by that mountain in Galilee and received the Great Commission, and the various gatherings of youth gymnasiums, auditoriums, and athletic fields around the country this spring to listen to commencement addresses and receive their diplomas. Both are significant, special occasions worth remembering and documenting. Both feature mixed emotions – celebration and sadness, worship and doubt. Both occur in the context of the community with whom those gathered have shared a common journey up to that point. But most significantly for our consideration today, both mark an ending – and feature everything that comes with it.

For our graduates, perhaps even more importantly than the achievement of getting a diploma, graduation signifies the end of high school life. Some will pursue further education in college or trade school, others will look to get a job and maybe look at getting their own place. Some will join the military, and still others will volunteer a year or more of their lives in service to others through BVS, Ameri-Corps, Peace Corps, or a similar program. But whatever the next stop in the journey of life, the one sure thing for all of them is that it will not be high school. With graduation, that part of your life is done forever.

There are mixed feelings that come with any ending in life. There is the joy of reminiscing over good memories. There is the pride over making it that far. There is regret for all those things you wished you had done when you had the chance. There is grief over knowing that you can never go back and relive those moments. There might be excitement over what is coming next, but usually mixed with the uncertainty of venturing into the unknown.

Which brings me around to the subject on which I want to focus the bulk of my remaining time this morning. It is another ending, not nearly so clean and clear as a graduation or a great commission. It is the ending of that era of the church which we might call Christendom.

For those of you who are not familiar with the language of Christendom, let me try to summarize: the term Christendom has its roots in the alliance of church and state that has been a feature of Western Culture since the time of Constantine's conversion to Christianity and his declaration of Christianity. Over the years, as empires have risen and fallen and the church has split and split again, the term became more appropriate to informally describe nations and areas that were predominantly Christian as opposed to Muslim or pagan. Today it can be thought of as the informal cultural hegemony the church has traditionally enjoyed in the Western world. Basically, the Christian church has been the dominant and most influential group and worldview in the West, even in nations like ours where the church and state have been officially and constitutionally separated. Politically, socially, culturally, ideologically, economically – you name it – the Christian worldview in the Western world has wielded greater influence and enjoyed more long-standing dominance than any other for over 1500 years.

But Christendom is dying. In fact, in many parts of the western world, it is already virtually dead. And with the end of Christendom, the church faces a challenge: change, or die with it.

That might sound harsh or overdramatic. But I believe it is the truth for the church in a post-Christendom world. Most of you know that I spent some time in the UK early this month on a study tour paid for by a Vital Pastors grant from the Lilly Foundation. One of the main reasons we chose to go there was that we wanted to see how churches and individual Christians were responding to a culture that was much farther along the path of post-Christendom than the US. We wanted to see how they interpreted faith, where they found new life and vitality, how they interacted with a predominantly secular culture, and how they met and responded to the challenges of a culture that was no longer friendly to the Christian faith.

One of the things we discovered was that not only was the church and the Christian faith no longer a primary player in the society and culture of Britain, but in many ways, it was now the subject of open hostility. A case in point: we were worshipping at the Vineyard Church of Sutton, a suburb of London on Sunday morning. During the service, the pastor, whom we met with afterwards, was reflecting on a recent trip to the United States. He said that he was again amazed at how openly and publicly so many Americans talk about their faith. He compared that to life in London, where he said "if we pray over our food or speak about God around the table with our friends at a restaurant, people around us look as if "we were urinating on their food" or blowing cigarette smoke in their faces." What was even more striking to me was that the comment didn't strike the congregation as outrageous. Instead, it was met with the silent agreement and understanding of those gathered. Clearly, the comment resonated with the congregation.

We learned that in Britain, only 6-7% of the population claims to be Christian. And of that percentage, only about half of those are even marginally involved in the life of a congregation. All told, only about 1% of the British population would be considered active Christians. All of this, ironically, in a nation where the Church of England is the official state church.

Now, one effect that all this might have on people of Christian faith is to produce a sense of hopeless grief. Because the church, and the Christian faith, as they have been known and practiced for centuries in England and in many other parts of the Western world, are clearly dying.

Another possible effect it might produce is desperate clinging to the traditions of the past, the faith of our Fathers, and/or the way things were. Doing so may help to ease the feelings of insecurity in

changing times, or comfort the fears of those who feel like the foundations of the world they know are crumbling beneath them. But in the long run, it is like clinging to a sinking ship.

But another possibility, one in which I and the members of my cohort group were most interested, is to view the end of Christendom in Western culture more like a graduation than a death. Like our youth who will leave their high school lives behind them after they graduate, and move on to new and different lives, the church could celebrate the end of Christendom for what it is – the end of an era in the Christian story – and look to a future that is different, yes, but also exciting, fresh, and ultimately just as good and faithful or even more so than what has gone before.

The limited time we spent in the UK provided a wonderful opportunity for my cohort group to be introduced to some of the ways in which new ways of being church are emerging in the UK. One such opportunity was a meeting with Johnny Baker, one of the leaders at the forefront of the alternative worship movement, who maintains that the church needs to engage with a cultural shift, “from the patterns of Christian life which took shape in modernity, to a faith which brings the authentic message of Christ to bear on life in postmodernity.” He leads a community of faith called simply “Grace”, which intentionally meets only once a month so as not to tax their creativity in worship and to embody their conviction that the primary call of Christians is not to dwell in the comfort of one another but to engage the world around them with the gospel.

Another was the chance to worship with Vineyard in Sutton and dialogue with their pastor Jason Clarke. They describe themselves as a group of people “doing life together...on a journey...with a shared mission...to help people live life to the full,” seeking to be a community where people can connect with God, with others, and with opportunities to make a difference in the world.

But probably the most interesting and relevant contact we made in London was with Stuart Murray, the author whose book is quoted in the bulletin meditation today. Not only is Murray an excellent scholar who provides a breadth of insight into the dynamics of the emerging church in Britain, he is also a key leader of the Anabaptist Network in the UK. The Anabaptist network is a relational movement which seeks “to offer resources and perspectives from the Anabaptist tradition for reflection on Christian discipleship in a post-Christendom culture, where churches are now on the margins rather than at the centre of society.”

For Murray and the others in the Anabaptist network, the Anabaptist tradition is uniquely suited to meet the challenges of the Church at or nearing the end of Christendom. This is precisely because the Anabaptists were always marginalized in their relation to both the established churches of Christendom as well as the state. Their roots are found in dissent from majority opinion, and their theology, traditions, and faith communities are not based upon the assumptions of privilege that now plague the Christendom churches. Anabaptist churches have a relational rather than a hierarchical basis. They believe in and practice communal biblical interpretation where the insights of all members are valued. They hesitate to insist on adherence to creeds that were formulated according to understandings based in the worldviews of the past, and instead stress the following of Christ in the world here and now.

Anabaptists have stressed the life and teachings of Jesus more than the traditions of any institutional church, and have looked to the marginalized Pre-Constantinian early church for inspiration and guidance rather than the privileged church of Christendom. And it is in this Anabaptist tradition that we in the Church of the Brethren find our heritage. When those eight men and women decided to baptize themselves in the Eder River in Schwarzenau, they willingly moved to the margins of their society. They broke from the Christendom pattern of church life in their day, and they set out on a new journey of faith together. In a very real sense, they “graduated” – marking an end to one phase of their life and faith, and casting their fates in an unknown future. I

can imagine that they felt a bit like those 11 who stood by the mountain as Jesus commissioned them for the next phase of their journey – even as they worshipped, they doubted.

The emerging churches of the UK and elsewhere present significant challenges to us today, often challenges that arise out of our very own Anabaptist heritage. One of the most poignant for me is the question of sustainability. Stuart Murray notes in his book that one of the primary reason people leave the church today is exhaustion – they simply cannot sustain the pace and demands of institutional church any longer. They reach the point that participation in the church does not nourish their souls and feed their faith, but rather robs them of energy and life. They tire of working to sustain an institution that no longer sustains their faith. And so they leave. Of this reality Murray writes, “The institutional paraphernalia, administrative complexity, membership expectations, and multiples activities that churches at the center of a sacral society could sustain are inappropriate and burdensome for a marginal...movement. One of the joys of the emerging churches is the freedom not only to do things differently but to do fewer things.”

I do not know how long it will take before the church in the US feels the reality of post-Christendom the way the churches in the UK do. But I am convinced that day is coming. And when it does, I wonder how we will respond to the end of Christendom. Will we simply fade into the sunset, beset by hopelessness for a revival of the church we once knew? Or will we cling desperately to the traditions of our institutional past, denying our own demise, and resisting vital change with every fiber of our being? Or will we embrace the end of an era like a graduation into a new phase of our life together, seeking new ways of being the church in the emerging world of post-Christendom?

The end of the gospel of Matthew is the beginning of our gospel. Those disciples did go into all the world and they made disciples – disciples who have passed on the message of Christ to us today. I pray that the end of Christendom will likewise be the beginning of the gospel for those who will come after us – our children and our grandchildren and their grandchildren generations from now. I pray that we will embrace the end of Christendom with the faith that whatever emerges in its place, that Christ will be with us to the end of the age.

Because if we don't, I'm afraid we'll end up all dressed up, with no place to go.

“Call to Worship”

Every Sunday, we gather together here to worship. Our worship service generally has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Today, it had an end, a middle, and a beginning. Because Jesus did not commission his disciples to gather together for worship. Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples in the spirit of worship. So may this hour of worship be the beginning of a week of worship, and as we go from this place, may we engage the world with the good news that Christ is *still* with us. Amen!