



24 it does seem that sensitivity to secular voices in the churches does allow us entrée into the  
25 culture. It does no good to shout at people on the outside from inside the fortress. No  
26 sense in being ‘retro’.” Toward the other end of the spectrum of Christian response to the  
27 current secularization of Christianity stand those who oppose any and all surrender to the  
28 surrounding culture in principle, but in fact, do and have done considerable adopting and  
29 adapting to it.

30 To offer even the barest outline of the historical path that has created this  
31 spectrum is, of course, beyond my physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities—and, I  
32 suspect, beyond your available time or patience, or even your interest. What I will do is  
33 to stay in character as an historian, one who has taught History of Christianity for a  
34 while; and, as an historian, I will supply you with some historical data (and some  
35 interpretation of that data) that may be useful to you in understanding where we are in  
36 this matter of “The Toleration of Moral Decay.”

37 There is an agenda here: I would implore the Church to resort to its sources and  
38 find out who it really is; to be itself and sound like itself. The fundamental source is  
39 Holy Scripture, which believers may read and hear with the assurance that the Holy Spirit  
40 will accompany it, for it is the Holy Spirit’s instrument. And, insofar as the Church is  
41 truly the Church, that Spirit is the “Lord and Giver of (its) life.” Life in her beginning at  
42 Pentecost, life in her tradition, life in her present, and life until her Lord comes again and  
43 all becomes one in Him.

44 I would implore the Church, too, to understand that she is a colony of the  
45 Kingdom of Heaven; the Servant of the Eternal in the Temporal. She is to radiate the will  
46 of God, “the culture of the Kingdom,” if you please, into the world around her. So, as is

47 the heart and mind of her Lord, she cannot *tolerate* moral decay. Never. As her Lord,  
 48 and in his name, she offers *forgiveness* for it. Always. She learns the world's language  
 49 and adapts to the surrounding cultural environment only and precisely so that she can  
 50 proclaim her own message of divine forgiveness, a joyfully penitential life, redemption,  
 51 sanctification, and everlasting life—all in community with others following the same  
 52 Lord on the same path. Again, she resorts to the world's vocabulary and adapts to her  
 53 worldly environment on as it provides opportunity to proclaim her own message and  
 54 demonstrate her own culture.

55 This agenda is also the personal passion of this historian as he sets out to help  
 56 others understand the Church from the perspective of their own disciplines. So, here it  
 57 will go to work for you sociologists and friends, adding some data that may help you to  
 58 understand the historical path the North American Christian churches followed on the  
 59 way to “The Toleration of Moral Decay.” It is not an historical survey, but (one hopes)  
 60 an heuristic presentation of factors unique to those churches, most of which continue to  
 61 be affective, though usually in a corrupted form, in determining the “moral values” of  
 62 (Anglophone) North American Christianity.

63

64 *SOME UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF ANGLOPHONE NORTH AMERICAN*  
 65 *CHRISTIANITY THAT HAVE A BEARING ON “THE TOLERATION OF MORAL*  
 66 *DECAY”*

67

68 The first of the unique characteristics of Anglophone North American Christianity  
 69 is that it has borne, from the beginning, a dissenting spirit. And underlying this has been

70 the confidence that a new, truly Christian, society can be formed. Consider this list of  
71 expressions of institutions and movements that were, at least in their beginnings,  
72 expressions of dissent. Founding of the colonies themselves (e. g., Edwin Sandys, jr.),  
73 Puritans, Harvard-Yale, First Great Awakening-Princeton, Pennsylvania. S.P.G. (Thos.  
74 Bray), problem with episcopacy in Church of England in America, Unitarian revolt  
75 against narrowness of Puritanism; Second Great Awakening, rise of Methodism and  
76 disputes within it, campmeetings, “Campbellites,” Holiness Movement, Pentecostal  
77 Movement, Missionary Movement, rise of the church-sponsored liberal arts college, rise  
78 of post-baccalaureate theological education for pastors, Darbyism-dispensationalism;  
79 Salvation Army in U.S., Fundamentalism, Social Gospel, Modernism, modern  
80 ecumenism, Neo-Fundamentalism (Evangelicalism), Liberation theologies, anti-  
81 denominationalism (or at least indifference to denomination).

82         A second unique characteristic of North American Christianity has been its  
83 emphases on the “gathered Church” and the “Believers’ Church” as contrasted with the  
84 Established (or State) Church. Even where there have been establishments in North  
85 America, tolerance has been the norm. (The cases of Massachusetts and Louisiana).  
86 There have been cases of *de facto* establishments all along, but these seldom go  
87 uncontested. (Often, however, the contestant has to give proof of being something of a  
88 dissident in his/her own tradition before the “establishment” offers full acceptance—e. g.,  
89 Herbert Hoover (Friends), and JFK.

90         A third unique characteristic of North American Christianity has been its  
91 emphasis on the minister as the principal “gatherer” of a congregation. This has led to a  
92 long history of problematic entrepreneurship in the North American ministry. The

93 minister has been required to be a). pious, in the usual sense—a cross between a Boy  
 94 Scout and a Rotarian (the categories are not so well-defined for women in ministry,  
 95 although the proportion of women ministers who are or have been entrepreneurial to the  
 96 total number of women in ministry may be much higher than that of the men—e. g.,  
 97 Mother Ann Lee, Phoebe Palmer, Mary Baker Eddy, Aimee Semple McPherson, Kathryn  
 98 Kuhlman, etc.). b). the North American minister is expected either to offer the  
 99 traditional in some attractive or with some novel twist, or to offer something new. But  
 100 the new has also to be presented with the same conviction and certainty as the traditional.

101         A fourth unique characteristic of North American Christianity has been its  
 102 emphasis on the personal piety of its constituents.

103

104                 *THE CONSEQUENCES OF THESE EMPHASES IN THE SLIDE OF NORTH*  
 105                 *AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY INTO THE “TOLERATION OF MORAL DECAY”*

106         The dissenting tradition of North American Christianity gave rise to a tendency to  
 107 think of the cleverest critics as the greatest saints. This has led, time and again, into  
 108 a). an explicit or implicit “sanctification” of demagoguery by biblically and theologically  
 109 unrooted, unreflective or uncritical, or unmentored Christians, and b). and explicit or  
 110 implicit “sanctification” of “one-issue” pastors and congregations by the same kinds of  
 111 Christians.

112         The emphasis on the “gathered church” has often left open the door to an  
 113 incipient, if not fully practiced, isolation from other Christian communities, which, in  
 114 turn, has left the minister or the congregation to work without clear mandates or a clear  
 115 sense and system of accountability for what s/he, or it, is doing.



138           The tradition of dissent that has marked North American Christianity, with its  
139 underlying confidence in new beginnings and its hope in a new, godly, society has been  
140 transformed into a supposedly Christian belief that the single greatest issue about which  
141 we must dissent is intolerance or having our minds and hearts made up and set. Where  
142 once the guns of Christian dissent were trained on moral and ethical carelessness and  
143 doctrinal sloppiness, they are now trained on any opposition to “Openness.” To whom  
144 could a conscientious pastor now refuse Holy Communion?

145           The secular analogue for the Gathered Church is the Church as “like-minded,  
146 friendly people.” The Gathered folk are now “the good folk.” And “good” has taken on  
147 socio-economic dimensions. How do we define “a good church?” Carper Memorial,  
148 First, Trinity, People’s (in Hog Eye).

149           The secular analogue for the entrepreneurial minister and church—not piety, but  
150 well-spokenness, neat appearance, etc. Much wiser to show that one knows how to get  
151 things done in the church than to sound as if you prayed at other times than on Sunday,  
152 studied, actually studied, the Written Word, and knew why we place a clean, white, linen  
153 cloth over the elements on the Communion table, and fold it neatly and place it on the  
154 table when we remove it, etc. And that we do not help the poor to prove anything, nor for  
155 any gain whatsoever to the Church.

156

157

### *CONCLUSION*

158           I have pointed out four emphases in the lengthening history of American  
159 Christianity which are unique to it. These emphases have both assets and liabilities; but  
160 since they are a part of us, it would seem that we might exercise divinely guided,

161 sanctified cleverness to renew them for our time, for they were designed to prevent  
162 precisely that moral and ethical corruption which is now upon us. Then I made an attempt  
163 to show what has happened to each of them as our culture has slipped into an apparently  
164 accelerating moral and ethical decay, largely, I think, because the churches have lost the  
165 language given them in the Written Word by the Holy Spirit; and lost the focus given us  
166 by the Spirit—the steadfast attention to the Living Word, Christ Jesus. The churches  
167 have generally corrupted each of these emphases for the sake of aggrandizing itself.  
168 *Metanoia*, turning around, repenting seems to be called for. Tragically, we appear to be  
169 arriving at a stage in which Christians seem content, in the interest of tolerance, to  
170 replace, or let those unique emphases be replaced by, their secular analogues.

171 All of this is diagnostic. But the heart of the Church's work is remedial. To it all,  
172 we are to offer Christ; we are to lift up Christ. Nothing less radical will do.

173

174 Prof. Max Otto's account of the boy who "knew his Latin," but could not read the sign:

175 *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam.*

176 Our sign is the Cross, a Resurrection Cross, for Christ's redeeming work is done. *In hoc*

177 *signo vinces*. In this sign, conquer! "Lift high the cross, The love of Christ proclaim,

178 'Til all the world shall know His wonderful name."