

The Great Unraveling

My wife loves to knit. I'm bemused as I watch her work. She will knit for hours and then, with a great sigh, unravel a week's worth of knitting. It's hard to watch.

In our story, what is coming undone is the long, cherished tradition of the “Euro-tribal churches” across North America. I use this term with great intention, and I'll take a moment to explain. The churches with which I have worked most closely and the ones with which this book deals most directly are those that trace to the great migrations from the United Kingdom and Europe over the past four to five hundred years, the churches that form the primary Christian groups in the United States and Canada. They created denominations shaped largely by ethnic and religious identities coming out of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century reformations: Lutherans (Germany and Scandinavia), Episcopalians (England), Presbyterians (Scotland), United Church of Canada (Great Britain), Methodists and Baptists (England), Mennonites (the Netherlands and Germany), and so forth.

To a great extent these denominations were formed and expanded in the context of strong national and ethnic identities. For this reason, I characterize them as tribal and use the phrase Euro-tribal churches. It is important to note, but isn't the subject of this book, that these Euro-tribal churches morphed and created a good number of “made in the Americas” denominations, such as Churches of Christ, Pentecostalism, and indigenous spin-offs like National Baptists or the African Methodist Episcopal Church. These are highly nuanced developments, running alongside the Euro-tribal story. Likewise, it is clear that the Roman Catholic Church, in its own migrations to North America, had to redefine itself as one denomination among

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many others. For multiple reasons—perhaps because its liturgical tradition and hierarchy better transcend national-cultural identities—it has seemed able to weather the unraveling more cohesively than the Protestant denominations.

For the Euro-tribal churches, the story of this unraveling goes back to the middle of the last century. Sociologist Hugh McLeod explains the lead-up to the breakdown this way:

In the 1940s and 1950s it was still possible to think of western Europe and North America as a “Christendom,” in the sense that there were close links between religious and secular elites, that most children were socialized into membership in a Christian society, and that the church had a large presence in fields such as education and welfare, and a major influence on law and morality.¹

The 1940s and 1950s, while influenced by fears of external threats from Communism, were a golden period for these churches. World War II had been won, the Great Depression was over, democracy was prevailing in the midst of a Cold War. The West was ready to celebrate, to leave behind the hardships of the previous half-century. Most Protestant churches flourished in this environment, where it seemed just about everyone and everything was Christian. These churches symbolized the public and social conscience of the age. They were the government, education, economic, and professional leaders of the nation at worship. Young families embraced the new suburbs, churches filled, and denominations experienced their greatest era of new church development.

In this milieu these churches can hardly be blamed for seeing themselves as the center of society and assuming their proclamations and actions would lead to the redemption and betterment of society. They pursued growth with gusto, expanding new church development, filling seminaries, and extending corporate denominational structures offering cradle-to-grave, branded programs that branched across the continent. Donald Luidens paints this picture:

The corporate denomination “metaphor” . . . seems to be an apt representation of the organizational formula that saw

1. Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31.

the establishment and routinization of religious communions throughout the United States. The wide-open “religious marketplace” in the post-World War II era accelerated the development of this corporate model. Like competing businesses occupying a growing market niche, Protestant denominations around the country routinely perfected their production processes and marketing techniques. In these early years the level of competition was minimal and “success” was widespread. However, over time the religious marketplace became a crowded one, competition grew and success became elusive, which accelerated the transformation of the corporate denomination. . . .

[R]eflecting the imperialistic optimism of the age, the corporate model ushered in a worldwide vision for Christian ministry (symbolized in the title of the flagship Protestant journal of this era, the *Christian Century*). . . . The corporate model fuelled, and was in turn fuelled by, a Christianity that was outward-looking and expansionist.²

Few were aware of, or prepared for, the earthquakes to come. Just as the young church, after Pentecost, focused on reestablishing God’s reign within the narrative of Jerusalem and Judaism and could not see the ways the Spirit was about to unravel most of its assumptions, so the denominations failed to see the massive dislocations into which the Spirit would soon deliver them.

The Protestant story couldn’t hold the imagination or desires of post-war generations, so the ’60s exploded like a socio-cultural-religious Mt. St. Helens. As McLeod observes: “In the religious history of the West these years may come to be seen as marking a rupture as profound as that brought about by the Reformation. . . . The 1960s was an international phenomenon.”³

Throughout North America and Europe, we witnessed the Baby Boom, rising economic possibilities for huge swaths of the public, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the Sexual Revolution, the emergence of the self as the central source

2. See Donald A. Luidens in *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman, editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 411–12.

3. Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–3.

of meaning. Along with these came the Human Potential Movement, the Women's Movement, a shrinking world with expanded religious options, the end of National Service in the United Kingdom, the expansion of higher education from elites to the middle classes, the suburbanization of society, and the proliferation of new media.

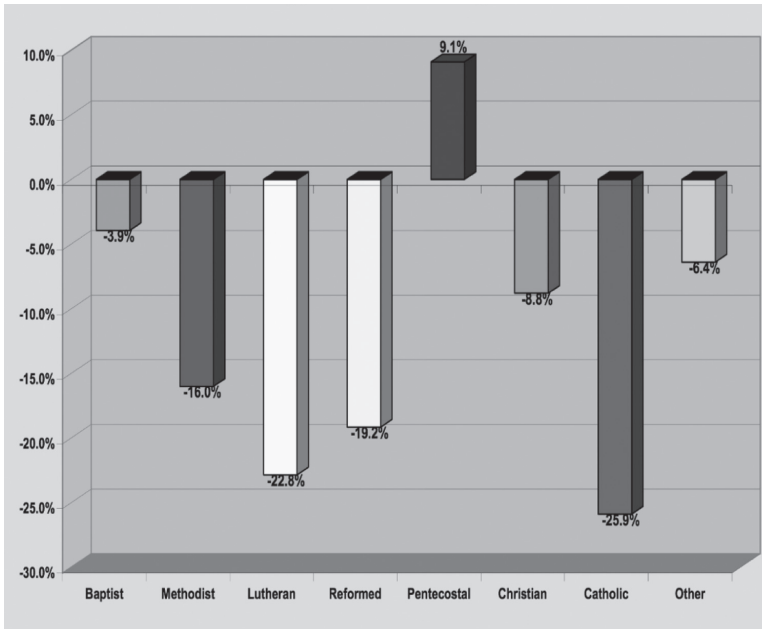
The changes went on and on, and their impact was massive and unexpected. Like the Babylonian captivity or the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, these events resulted in massive dislocation. The churches were thrown into a world for which they were unprepared. The natural instinct is to fix what is broken and to get back to the stability and predictability they had known. But that world had been torn up.

By the late 1960s numerical growth for the mainline denominations had come to a screeching halt. Despite warnings from observers of culture such as Peter Berger and Gibson Winter, the churches were largely unprepared. They continued expanding national staff, building national headquarters, and marketing their branded programs.

Protestant churches have only continued to lose their place in the emerging cultural milieu. If anything, the change has picked up pace, unabated, over the proceeding decades. Despite claims that conservative, evangelical churches had found the secret to growth, there is now sufficient evidence that the primary reason conservative churches grew was defections from mainline churches. The conservative Protestant churches have experienced their own unraveling tsunami, just a little later.

This unraveling has manifested most keenly as a progressive loss of connection between the churches and the generations that emerged from the 1960s onward. Here are some illustrations:

- If you were born between 1925 and 1945, there is a 60 percent chance you are in church today.
- If you were born between 1946 and 1964, there is a 40 percent chance you are in church today.
- If you were born between 1965 and 1983, there is a 20 percent chance you are in church today.
- If you were born after 1984, there is less than a 10 percent chance you are in church today.

1990–2005 Growth or Decline as a Percentage of the Population by Denominational Family

Good News in Unlikely Places

Ultimately, it is my strong contention that the Spirit has been at work in this long unraveling. The Spirit is inviting these churches to embrace a new imagination, but the other one had to unravel for us to see it for what it was. In this sense the malaise of our churches has been the work of God. Allow me to spell out several implications for this proposal:

FIRST: If the Spirit has been at work in this long unraveling, then God is not done with the Euro-tribal, Protestant churches. In Scripture places of unraveling were preludes to God shaping a new future for God's people. For instance, the persecutions of Acts 8 precipitated a profoundly different church from the one the disciples imagined after Pentecost.

SECOND: We are not in a contemporary or temporary "exile." Such language made sense to a generation that came to leadership

in the 1970s, but for the generations that followed, this is not some strange exilic land. Exile language is tinged with the eventuality that there's a way back. In truth, there is no returning, no going back. We are in a new location, a land many people call home, and so the churches must ask very different questions. Exile questions about how to fix and make the church work again won't help us to discern the Spirit.

THIRD: This space of unraveling is a space of hope. We are witnessing the Spirit preparing us for a new chapter in the story of God's mission. Our churches are at the end of a way of being God's people and at the beginning of something significantly different. It involves our awakening to an invitation that is not about fixing the church but a journey of exploration.

FOURTH: In this journey we are experiencing dislocation. More than adjustment, major change is required. The Spirit's invitation requires risk-taking, as we try on practices that will seem strange and awkward at first. It will ask us to change our basic sense of where God is at work. It will change our ideas about the location of God's actions.

FIFTH: We are embarking on a shared journey to discern what the Spirit is up to ahead of us in our neighborhoods and to join God in these places. How do we discern together? How do we join with God? How will this joining require us to be changed as a gathered people?

SIXTH: Like all new journeys we will need new ways of traveling. For Christians these ways are called *practices*. The final chapters of this book will explore several of them.

For these six reasons and lots more, I think the unraveling is God's good news for us. This is not the first time the Spirit has substantially disrupted the established patterns of the church's practice and place in a culture, and it will not be the last. Old Testament and New Testament examples abound. In addition, think of the disruption that happened when Christianity was formally designated the official religion of the Roman Empire—that dislocation led to the initiation of a rich desert monastic tradition. By the fifth and sixth

centuries, Europe was in a period of massive social dislocation, and it sparked the emergence of new movements like the Celtic missionaries of the British Isles.

When I propose to groups that the great unraveling we're experiencing should be treated as an opportunity, and even as the work of the Spirit, the responses take several shapes. First, people reluctantly agree with the assessment. Then they take positions of resistance and critique. Many suggest the shifts in imagination and practice proposed in this book are too dramatic to be done in their churches or denominations. This response is understandable, and I don't dismiss it. What is required is a radical shift in the orientation of Christian life in North America.

I've come to this conviction after many years of wrestling with the question of Christian identity in societies rapidly removing the Christian narrative from the center of their lives. I work with denominational leaders of every stripe who tell me their members don't know how the Christian story forms a coherent narrative about what God is up to in the world or how we form our lives around it. As one bishop shared recently, his gut wrenches after visiting congregations and clergy. They know how to be kind and caring, but they don't know the Christian story. Congregants glue fragments of the story together with other bits from the media or latest trends in spirituality and self-help to blend their own, ever-shifting amalgam of beliefs and practices. There is a cry for discipleship programs or workshops to fix it all, but the problem lies at a much deeper level. The unraveling will not be resolved from within current assumptions about being God's people.

While I am not proposing the end of our churches or our traditions, congregational life and the role of clergy has to dramatically change. Congregations will still be the vital center where God's mission is worked out in our cities, towns, and villages. They are not going away. The unraveling is about a remaking of the church. This remaking is already underway.

The Unraveling Image

Because I have seen the resistance to the image of "unraveling," I want to spend a moment explaining why I think it's so crucial to understanding this stage in churches' lives.

Unraveling is a natural part of life.

Ways of life unravel over time. My wife travels to Ontario from Vancouver several times a year, and the trips increase as her parents age into their late nineties. With each visit Jane sees her mom and dad losing capacities they once took for granted. They once loved traveling, but it's too difficult for them to fly no matter how easy we try to make it. Painful as it is to watch, we know it is natural and appropriate. They are aging, they are changing, and our life with them is unraveling.

When my granddaughter Maddie was born in 2007, someone crocheted a baby blanket for her. Maddie and the blanket became inseparable. Over the years "Blanky" has gone through the washer and dryer more times than anyone can remember. Thanks to all those cycles, Blanky is irrevocably coming apart. My wife and daughter have tried to sew the fraying edges back together, but they won't win this one. Recently, ominous holes have appeared in the middle. Blanky is unraveling.

None of us celebrate this. Blanky has been a vital part of Maddie's growing up, especially when her mom was battling cancer. There is security, history, comfort, warmth, and just plain normalcy about having Blanky around, and we would like to fix the holes. But Maddie will soon have to adapt to life without Blanky by her side.

The new wine needs new wineskins.

It is not that the ways we have been God's people were wrong. They were developed for another time, and now they are fraying, stretched and torn in the midst of massive social change. This was, in part, why Jesus spoke of wineskins and new wine (Matthew 9:16–17). He did not say we need to throw away our traditions. If we know anything about wine, we know the new wine isn't always great. Good wine needs to sit for years before it matures and is ready to be enjoyed. But sometimes wineskins lose their capacity to stretch.

What I have to say is far from a simplistic celebration of the new. It's not a call to embrace the latest and greatest fads in worship or clergy training. But our imaginations as Christians got stuck in particular ways of being God's people. We have poured our energy into

trying to repair the old wineskins, while the Spirit was pointing us in a different direction.

Unraveling must inspire more than grief.

Ours is not just any unraveling: it is a great unraveling, for something precious and enormously important to us has come apart and can no longer be woven back together. Those church traditions emanating from the European reformations have nurtured and shaped our imaginations for more than four centuries, and that imagination has in turn shaped a whole way of life, given us our identities, and provided us with ways of reading and navigating worlds. This precious heritage has had a long run near the center of Western societies. We are effectively at the end of that long period.

Given this truth, commentators regularly observe that we're experiencing loss and need significant time and space to walk through the stages of grief before we can move forward. I used to agree but not any longer. Some grieving will go on for a little longer, but this cannot be the primary response. Grief belongs to those who have lived long and deeply into the Euro-tribal churches' stories, and to those who have yoked themselves to that identity. But if the church's glory days were at least forty years ago, that means the generations without these memories are the majority. The only story they know is the unraveling, although they have heard much of life before the unraveling and may grieve alongside older leaders. Still, these new generations come with different experiences and expectations, and we need their leadership to challenge the primacy of the narrative of grief and fixing.

There's no use trying to explain the unraveling.

Loss produces the need for explanation. Some talk about the end of Christendom. Others speak of a "post"-something age (such as, post-Christian or post-denominational). But this is not particularly helpful. As theologian Graham Ward once said, placing the modifier "post" in front of an abstract noun doesn't render that noun any clearer but symbolizes a loss of explanations for what has occurred to us.⁴ Still others say secularization is the culprit, but I find that theory

4. Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 154–55.

questionable. We simply don't live in a world of unbelief. Ours is a time when the opposite is true: people are yearning to believe in something, but the churches have little power to capture their attention.

If such explanations aren't sufficient, what do we do? What if we ask how these churches have actually addressed this unraveling over the past half-century? Attending to what we have been doing in the midst of this unraveling will tell us about the convictions out of which we operate. If we can name some of these convictions, we can propose alternative pathways for addressing the crisis. This is our task in the next chapter.