Keith Watkins

A New American Church for a World Groaning in Travail

*The era in which the Consultation on Church Union began its work to remake the church and the nation*

The decade of the 1950s was a moment in America when two cultural forces were coming together like tectonic plates. By the end of the decade, major systems in American life were experiencing tremors that presaged a more dramatic revolution than most people—especially those in leadership positions—could have imagined. When the tremors came, a natural response was to hold things together until the shaking ceased and then to shore up the systems where vulnerabilities had been revealed. A more imaginative response by a few church leaders was to acknowledge that something much more substantial needed to be done. New systems able to withstand the shaking America’s institutions would have to be devised.

One of these efforts to create something new, the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), was the attempt by leaders of ecumenical protestant churches at the center of American culture, politics, and economic life to create a new American church that would reunite central elements of faith, liturgical practice, ministry, and mission. Classic traditions would be reaffirmed and new patterns adapted to American life could come into being. From its beginning with a news-making sermon on December 4, 1960, and continuing through the decade of the 1960s, this venture made significant progress toward the achievement of its announced goal. With the publication of *A Plan of Union* in 1970, representatives of the participating churches presented a remarkably imaginative and challenging plan for overcoming divisions that had characterized church life ever since the sixteenth century Reformation.

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During the next years, however, the energy subsided. While the Consultation continued, the vision dimmed, objectives were significantly changed, and the likelihood of success faded away. In January 2002, after four decades of life, COCU's traditions and some of its hopes and objectives were carried over into a new entity—Churches Uniting in Christ—which representatives of several American churches hoped could develop new modes of expressing the essential oneness of Christ's Church.

The fact that this venture to create a new American church was launched in one of the nation's most prestigious churches, located in the city whose history revolves around a great earthquake, adds a special quality to the story. This church, Grace Episcopal Cathedral high atop Nob Hill in San Francisco, had been moved to this prestigious location after the 1906 earthquake, and in its half century on this site had manifested the intertwining of religion, culture, politics, and financial power that represented the standing order in American life. Yet, as much as any place in the United States, this storied city by the Gold Gate, precariously poised on the San Andreas Fault, also was in the process of becoming a symbolic center of the cultural earthquake that would soon shake the nation to its foundations.

Religious leaders during the nineteen sixties envisioned a church that was firmly anchored to the old order, to the presuppositions and systems that had developed during the period between the two world wars and flourished during the post-war return to normalcy. In the light of the existing structures of American life, the initial results of this unity movement were unprecedented, and had that cultural world continued, this new church might well have come into existence. What established leaders of the nations institutions, secular and religious, could scarcely comprehend, was that the new forces already shaking the foundations of American life would undermine their efforts and require that new ways of representing the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church would have to be devised.

By remembering this dramatic moment in the recent history of American Protestantism, we can understand in a better way the relationship of these once-dominant churches to one another. We can also understand more fully the role of culturally centrist churches in shaping the patterns of public life in a nation that has steadily moved away from many of its classic systems and continues its struggle to find new ways of manifesting the basic principles of the American commonwealth. Most important, we can articulate anew the continuing need for the followers of Christ to be united "so that the world
may believe” (to use the words of Jesus) and be ready to participate in the renewal of the world even now “groaning in travail waiting for its redemption” (to use the words of Paul).

**The Return to Normalcy**

When World War II closed and the world began a painful process of recovery, the characteristic that dominated American life was one that often is referred to as the *return to normalcy*. American GIs came home from the war, married their sweethearts, begat children, and prepared for a new future by studying on the GI Bill. New housing developments sprang up around the edges of the old cities, schools and commercial developments followed soon thereafter, and improved streets and highways facilitated this development. The primary institutions of the dominant culture in America—government, universities, banks, concert halls, and churches—were regaining their strength and settling into a way of life that was consistent with their pre-war forms.

During these post-war years, churches and their related institutions prospered. Nineteenth century church buildings were demolished and grand new structures—with increased seating in their sanctuaries and dramatically increased educational facilities—rose up. Attendance increased significantly, church membership figures followed similar growth patterns, and financial resources multiplied. This new burst of ecclesiastical prosperity can be seen in areas where the trends were especially strong, such as Southern California. Coming to this burgeoning region in 1955, a young minister of the Reformed Church of America, Robert H. Schuller, started a new, precedent-breaking congregation in a drive-in theater. In time, it would become the acclaimed, often controversial, trans-denominational Crystal Cathedral, later to be housed in a building with so much glitter that it could be seen by astronauts circling the globe. Long-established congregations also prospered during the post-war years. At First Presbyterian Church in Pasadena, for example, during the eleven-year ministry of Eugene Carson Blake (ending in 1951), membership grew from 3,500 to 4500. At the same time, the pastor devoted much of his energy to public affairs, advocating for new patterns of justice, equality, and opportunity across the Los Angeles basin, and to the worldwide ecumenical movement.

The return to religion encouraged Protestant churches to strengthen their patterns of working together through church councils. One of the most effective was the Church Federation of Indianapolis, which created a depart-
ment of church planning. In cooperation with Christian Theological Seminary in their city, and with funding from Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment, the Federation provided an office for research and planning so that the churches could plant new congregations as the city grew outward. Together, these institutions developed one of the nation’s most imaginative ventures of locally generated religious broadcasting. In cooperation with major hospitals in the city, the Endowment and the Seminary established pioneering programs of pastoral counseling in medical facilities. The seminary’s enrollment was swollen by an influx of World War II veterans who had decided to enter the ministry and were using the G. I Bill to fund their education. Quickly this burgeoning student body outgrew the seminary’s facilities, which had been constructed only a few years earlier (1943), and the new dean, who previously had been the pastor of a rapidly growing church, established a program for establishing a new identity and a new, expanded campus for the school.

As this unprecedented expansion of the churches and their institutions continued, however, a growing number of scholars and pastors sensed that the culture’s return to normalcy could not continue. Church historian Ronald E. Osborn expressed this uneasiness in a 1958 book, *The Spirit of American Christianity*, which was based on lectures that he had given during a semester on the faculty of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland. Speaking to European and Asian students who already were skeptical about American churches, Osborn portrayed the strength and character of the churches that he honored and loved. Yet he closed the book by acknowledging that “the signs of the times do not yet indicate a revival of religion in contemporary America in any thoroughgoing way...Our so-called ‘return to religion’ may be only a resurgent primitivism which would silence doubt and fear with the magic of faith, invoking a divine blessing upon the American Way rather than devoutly seeking the will of the Eternal God for America.” His final words were from the hymn by John Greenleaf Whittier:

Breathe through the heats of our desire  
Thy coolness and Thy balm;  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm.
The Tumultuous Era

That same year—1958—Harold E. Fey, editor of the leading journal of opinion among American Protestants published an editorial in which he declared that 1957 was “the year when religion passed crest.” Sitting at my pastor’s desk in a small San Joaquin Valley church, I momentarily experienced disbelief, but that feeling quickly changed. Fey had named a process that pastors and other church leaders were experiencing at a deep level, but scarcely recognizing with their more cognitive powers. Despite the move toward reestablishing the old way of life, American society was undergoing deep changes that would make it difficult for any system based on older patterns to be effective.

In his 700-page history of the 1950s, David Halberstam proposes that August 23, 1949, is the date when the world changed. On that day, President Harry S. Truman announced that the Soviet Union had detonated an atomic device. For a short period of time following America’s use of atomic bombs in Japan, the United States had been the unchallenged military master of the world. No matter how powerful their military might be, no other nation could match America’s control of (and willingness to use) atomic weaponry in order to work its will upon the systems of the world. The moment that this monopoly on destructive power was broken, the world entered into a new competitive and significantly more dangerous era. Two world powers now existed, each driven by powerful ideologies, each determined to be the center of a concert of nations, each one ready to mix political, economic, and military power to work its will over other nations. The Cold War and the Iron Curtain, the two metaphors that describe the following era, conveyed both the new pattern of relationships and the foreboding sense of danger. Anti-Communist rhetoric became one of the most important features in campaigns for public office and development of public policy. A climate of distrust chilled many of the normal processes of personal and institutional life. Unscrupulous and self-serving public leaders like Senator Joseph McCarthy could accuse politicians, preachers, and professors of anti-American attitudes and practices. It was a hard and fearful time.

During this same period, Americans were plunged into new efforts to resolve their perpetual struggle with the legacy of slavery and segregation. Brown vs. Board of Education, announced by the Supreme Court on May 17, 1954, was “perhaps the single most important moment in the decade, the moment that separated the old order from the new and helped create the
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tumultuous era just arriving" (Halberstam, 423). The old order was a system of law, community structure, and cultural practice that allowed the dominant Euro-American society to subjugate African-American people, forcing them to live in ways that denied them many of the basic rights, opportunities, and privileges of life that everyone else could take for granted. Despite the fact that the Court’s action had reaffirmed that integration of public facilities was the law of the land, to be practiced in public schools and other institutions, there was widespread resistance and federal action was necessary to enforce even the main elements of the new systems. This was the case all around the country, but especially in the American South. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., were among the corps of courageous and skilled leaders who energized the Civil Rights Movement and set in motion more substantial changes in American life than most people could have imagined possible. Even though many white church leaders supported these changes, often at great personal risk, most churches in North and South resisted these changes. It was often stated that 11:00 o’clock on Sunday morning, the ordinary time for worship, was the most segregated hour in American life.

Among the results of this racial revolution was the move to the suburbs by a large percentage of American city dwellers and the filling in of urban neighborhoods by people of color. In most places, the modest efforts to develop integrated congregations in the churches failed. While the return to religion continued for a time, it was increasingly achieved at the cost of diminished vitality in the urban congregations that long had been the mainstays of the Christian movement in America.

Since the Civil Rights Movement focused much of its attention upon the integration of public schools, America’s children and youth were much involved. Even so, the chief antagonists in the struggles over race, as in the political climate of the Cold War, were adults. Another aspect of cultural transformation during the Fifties, however, was rooted in youth culture. In their new music, much of it driven by the musical culture of African Americans, young people around the nation (and soon around the world) declared their independence from the conventional values and systems of their parents and teachers. More than anyone else, Elvis Presley represented the new age: syncopated, sensuous, and soulful. This new music, Halberstam comments, became the means by which young people of the time defined themselves and declared their independence from their parents’ values and systems. Although some claimed to enjoy both classical music and rock and roll, it was
clear that for most of them, when left to themselves, Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms went silent and Elvis, the Beatles, and The Electric Prunes filled the void with powerful sound.

The sensuousness of popular music provided an aesthetic setting for the growing public awareness of sexual behavior and changes in sexual practice. From his academic position at Indiana University, Alfred Kinsey directed serious research into sexual behavior that resulted in books that quickly catapulted his research institute into prominence in the United States and then around the world. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* was published in 1948, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* came out five years later, and three more volumes were published after Kinsey's death in 1956. Although Kinsey was an active churchgoer throughout his life, many church leaders loudly criticized his publications because he did not denounce the behavior that he reported. Not only did Billy Graham, who represented conservative Protestantism, oppose Kinsey's work, but leaders of progressive Protestantism, including Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church in New York City and Henry Pitney Van Dusen, president of nearby Union Theological Seminary, spoke against Kinsey and his work.

Simultaneous with the debate over Kinsey's work, was a second significant debate over sexuality. The broader topic was "family planning" or "birth control," but the more immediate issue that prompted much of the debate was the development of "the pill," the oral means of contraception. The scientific issues involved in finding an oral contraceptive were difficult enough, but persuading the guardians of public morality that its use was moral, legal, and appropriate was even more difficult. While it could be expected that the Catholic Church, with its long-standing opposition to any kind of birth control, would oppose the use of oral contraceptives, many Protestants also were uneasy about it. The pill would make it easier for people of every age to become sexually active outside of wedlock, and this, it was believed, would weaken the integrity of marriage and the home and to a previously unimaginable degree encourage promiscuity.

Despite the comprehensive account that Halberstam gives to the 1950s, he virtually ignores religious developments other than to note opposition to the Kinsey studies. During this decade, however, the religious sector was, in fact, active and influential.
The Churches Respond

In the summer of 1949, Billy Graham, a 31-year-old Southern Baptist preacher began what was intended to be a three-week evangelistic meeting in a circus tent in Los Angeles. News executive William Randolph Hearst threw the support of his newspapers and magazine chain behind the meeting, and it stretched out to eight weeks. Graham kept on preaching in crusades around America and in 1954 made the cover of *Time*. His 1957 crusade in New York City’s Madison Square Garden ran nightly for sixteen weeks. Graham’s appeal and ability to connect with systems of power is illustrated by the fact that beginning with Harry S. Truman, Graham has cultivated personal ties with each American president. Other people also reenergized the revivalist strain in the American religious tradition, most notably Oral Roberts. In 1947, when he was 29 years old, he resigned his pastorate and began conducting evangelistic and healing meetings and broadcasting on radio. In 1954, Roberts began TV broadcasting. During his career, his reputation as evangelist was second only to that of Billy Graham.

In sharp contrast to resurgence of the revivalist tradition, another trend during this period was the alliance formed between psychiatry and theology, resulting in the rising importance of pastoral counseling in the churches. A popular version of this movement focused around the work of minister Norman Vincent Peale who with psychoanalyst Smiley Blanton established a clinic near the Marble Collegiate Church in New York City where Peale was pastor. In 1942 they collaborated on a book *Faith Is the Answer: A Psychiatrist and a Pastor Discuss Your Problems*, but their partnership ended ten years later when Peale published *The Power of Positive Thinking*. In this new volume the Manhattan preacher with a national radio and TV audience developed an optimistic religious message that many in Blanton’s profession and in mainline churches found unsustainable, either on the grounds of psychotherapy or religion.

A second mode of religious practice with more widely accepted theoretical foundations was the pastoral counseling movement that had been pioneered by Richard Cabot, a physician and adjunct professor at Harvard Divinity School, and Anton Boisen, a Congregational minister with a long association with Chicago Theological Seminary. During the 1950s, the dominant figure in this movement was Seward Hiltner who taught first at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and then at Princeton Theological Seminary. In his classes, Hiltner trained two generations of pastors in this new
discipline, and his books (three published in the 1940s, five in the 1950s, and two more in the 1960s) spread this new form of pastoral practice into every corner of church life. Although people in the pastoral counseling movement affirmed the value of religious conversion and people in the reviverist movement were willing to practice a modest mode of pastoral counseling, these two movements represented significantly different ways to understand the gospel and shape Christian ministry. What they held in common, however, was a focus on the well being of the individual within the immediate social setting. Whether the method was evangelism or pastoral counseling, the goal was to help individuals realize their full potential as human beings in their larger context.

In addition to evangelists and counselors, academic theologians came into greater prominence during the 1950s, with two names at the top of the list. Paul Tillich (1886-1965), was reared and educated in Germany where he served briefly as a Lutheran pastor and then as a university based theologian. Driven from his work by the Nazi regime in 1933, he came to the United States and taught at Union Theological Seminary from 1933 to 1955 when he was appointed to the Harvard faculty where he remained until 1962. He then moved to the University of Chicago where he taught until his death in 1965. Tillich’s sermon, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (published in 1948), provides the metaphor that describes this era. In that same year, a group of Tillich’s earlier lectures and essays were published with the title *The Protestant Era*. Its suitability for the period of cultural change then emerging is indicated by the fact that his title, before it had been revised by the publisher, was “The End of the Protestant Era.”

Even before most people recognized the radical character of the post-war period, Tillich already was anticipating the significant challenges that mainstream culture, including the Christian establishment, would soon encounter. During the next decade, this slow-speaking, German-accented academic voice would become increasingly well known by Americans. His books came rapidly from the press: *The Courage to Be*, (1952), *Biblical Theology and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (1955), *Theology of Culture* (1959). Despite the tightly compressed character of Tillich’s philosophical theology, he attracted widespread attention, enough so that *The Saturday Evening Post* published an article by Tillich (June 14, 1958) and he made the cover of *Time* (March 16, 1959). In his publications, Tillich represented a point of view that would later become a motif of his life and work: *living on the boundary*. Even
though he resolutely articulated the need for the church and its leaders to live on the boundary between cultural worlds, it would take time for people to realize that this transitional way of life was the only one that could be sustained.

Despite his German name, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was born in the United States and spent his entire working life in this country. Since he was only six years younger than Tillich and Karl Barth (the other dominant theologian of the era), Niebuhr’s early life and work were also shaped by World War I and the deep distress that swept over the western world in its aftermath. After earning his B.D. and M.A. degrees at Yale, Niebuhr served as pastor of a small German speaking church (it switched to English in 1919) in Detroit where he moved vigorously into the struggles that people were facing. He opposed both Henry Ford and the Ku Klux Klan. His first book, *Does Civilization Need Religion* (1927), was published while he served this pastorate, and his second book, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, although published in 1930 after he had begun his career on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, reported on his experiences during the Detroit years.

Niebuhr continued his prodigious publishing schedule: *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (1932), *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of Tragedy* (1937), *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (1941), and *Faith and History* (1949). Despite suffering a stroke in 1952, Niebuhr published three books during the decade of the 1950s: *The Irony of American History* (1952), *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (1953), and *The Self and the Dramas of History*, Charles Scribner’s Sons (1955). Since Tillich began his Union tenure only three years after Niebuhr had arrived, the two preeminent voices in American theology worked as colleagues on the same faculty for twenty-two years. Whereas Tillich’s theological work was intertwined with philosophical and cultural issues that dealt with the basic spirit of this era, Niebuhr’s work was intertwined with social theory and ethical practices, with increasing urgency making alliances with political and economic systems. One of the ironies of Niebuhr’s work is that sixty years after the publication of his book on the ironies of American history politicians and political theorists of sharply contrasting points of view are citing him as the intellectual source of many of their ideas and practices.
Christian Unity and the Crisis of the Age

Although Niebuhr did not participate in the Consultation on Church Union, he forthrightly announced themes that were widespread in the worldwide movement for Christian unity and two decades later would be among COCU’s central topics of interest. During his years in Detroit, says Larry L. Rasmussen, Niebuhr “tested the alternatives he would find wanting—religious and secular liberalism and Marxism—even when he remained a sobered and reformed liberal and secularist” (Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life, p. 7). In the summer of 1937, the same year that Niebuhr published his book Beyond Tragedy, representatives of churches from around the world gathered for two conferences. During July, they met at Oxford for the Conference on Life and Work, focusing on the theme “Church, Community, and State.” In August, representatives met in Edinburgh for the Conference on Faith and Order, which dealt with “the dogmatic and ecclesial questions confronting the churches and more specifically with the problem of church unity on the basis of creed and doctrine.”

A year later, Swiss theologian Adolph Keller wrote that “together they represented the greatest concentration of Christian thought and action in the history of the Church since the Reformation” (8). Describing these two conferences, Swiss theologian Adolf Keller declared that the old world was ending and that we could not yet see what the new would be. What could be seem with certainty was “the end of institutions, values, and formulae of an economic and social system; of ideals and ideas which we cherished and for which we stood. A rift appears to be cleaving our whole civilization and we cannot foresee whether or not this rift will not penetrate our own churches, our lives, and our hearts.” (35). Keller then discussed “three great world powers [that] are promising us salvation, a new world order, and reconstruction on the basis of peace and mutual co-operation: Communism, Fascism, and that constructive idealism of which the League of Nations may be called the most conspicuous exponent” (37). After showing how each of these solutions fell short, Keller asked if the Church had an answer, and then noted quickly that the answer wouldn’t come from a new theology or a better way of administration.

Only a new Pentecost, a new descent of the Holy Spirit will provide a solution to the problems facing the world. “The Church of power, of wealth, of national or class limitation, of success and security, has come to an end,” Keller declared near the close of his book. God’s wrath and judgment is on any
Church built on the narrow basis of a self-confident denominationalism, or of humanistic ethics, or of a rigid formula, or on shallow idealism, and not on the One Rock which is Christ, and Christ alone" (101). Throughout the book, it is clear that Keller is committed to the idea of a visibly united church, but its basis for unity had to be strong. The ecumenical movement cannot be content with the idea that “melting together of our provisional churches...would bring about the united Church,” which already exists in so far as Christ “is our common Head, our invisible center of faith, in so far as our faith is this unity in Him” (104).

We don't know if Eugene Carson Blake, a thirty-year-old Presbyterian pastor in Albany, New York, had read Keller's book. What is known is that during his formative years, he had read deeply in theological literature inspired by the two crisis-oriented theological conferences held during the summer of 1937, and he would have encountered ideas similar to Keller’s in the journal Christendom and in J. H. Oldham’s Christian Newsletter (Brackenridge, 107). During his early ministry, Blake had turned away from the traditionally conservative religious ethos of his boyhood years and the liberal theology that he had learned during his theological education. As he moved into national leadership both in church and public affairs, Blake was drawn to the neo-orthodox theology and activist approach of Reinhold Niebuhr whose stern visage had been portrayed on the cover of Time during Blake’s Pasadena years (March 8, 1948). In Niebuhr, Blake found a model for a theology that was seriously scriptural, consonant with the intellectual tradition of western culture, and actively engaged in the political, economic, and cultural struggles of the society.

With the ending of the tumultuous decade of the 1950s, it was time for leaders of churches at the center of American life to take bold, decisive action. On Sunday, December 4, 1960, that action began. The narrative of what took place thereafter is the subject of my forthcoming book, The American Church That Might Have Been: A History of the Consultation on Church Union.