Are Churches Secularizing America?

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Several years ago, a mainline theologian told me of his experience at an evangelical megachurch. He was visiting his children and grandchildren during spring break and then Easter Sunday arrived. Nothing visibly suggested that it was a Christian service, but this distinguished theologian tried to reign in his judgments. There was no greeting from God or sense that this was God's gathering. The songs were almost exclusively about us, our feelings, and our intentions to worship, obey, and love; but it was not clear whom they were talking about or why. He concluded, "Well, evangelicals don't really have a liturgy. They put all of the content into the sermon, so I'll wait."

His patience, however, was not rewarded. Although it was Easter, the message (with no clear text) was on how Jesus gives us the strength to overcome our obstacles. Lacking even a benediction, this theologian left discouraged. He had come to an evangelical church at Easter and instead of meeting God and the announcement of a real victory over sin and death by Jesus Christ, he encountered other Christians who were being given fellowship and instructions for making their own "Easter" come true in their life.

Pressed with leading questions by his son-in-law as to his reaction to the service (like, "Did it touch your heart?"), the theologian broke his silence: "I assume you're trying to 'evangelize' me right now," he said. "But there was no 'gospel' anywhere in that service that might convert me if I were unconverted." He concluded, "Not even in the most liberal churches I've been in was the service so devoid of Christ and the gospel. It's like 'God *who*?'"

Since then, a mainline Methodist theologian told me of an almost identical experience-curiously also at Easter-in a conservative Presbyterian church that was known around the university for its "Bible-believing" and "Christ-centered" ministry. He too left disappointed (the sermon was something about how Jesus overcame his setbacks and so can we), further substantiating his appraisal that evangelicals are as likely as mainliners today to talk pop-psychology, politics, or moralism instead of the gospel.

Over a century ago, Princeton theologians Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield observed that according to the system of revivalism associated especially with Charles Finney, God was not even necessary. If conversion and revival are "simply the philosophical result of the right use of means" rather than a miracle of God's grace, all you have to do is find the right techniques, procedures, and methods that work across the board: in business, politics, and religion. A lot of the church growth literature of the past few decades assumes the same outlook. Could evangelicalism grow and experience success even if God didn't exist?

Sociologist Christian Smith has done extensive research revealing that the spirituality of America's teens is best described as "moralistic, therapeutic deism." ¹ In fact, other

sociologists have come to similar conclusions concerning older generations as well. So while evangelicals are often quick to launch public protests against "secular humanists" for diminishing the role of God in American society, it would seem that the more likely source of secularization is the church itself. I am not claiming that evangelicalism is "atheistic" or even "deistic" in principle, but that in practice it is losing its interest in God and the grand story of his saving work in Jesus Christ.

Substantiating the Charge

Based on numerous studies conducted by his research group, evangelical pollster George Barna writes: "To increasing millions of Americans, God-if we even believe in a supernatural deity-exists for the pleasure of humankind. He resides in the heavenly realm solely for our utility and benefit. Although we are too clever to voice it, we live by the notion that true power is accessed not by looking upward but by turning inward." ² Unless something changes, Barna thinks, "it will be every man for himself, with no second thoughts or regrets about the personal or societal implications of this incredibly selfish, nihilistic, narcissistic way of life." ³

Most Americans have at least an intellectual assent when it comes to God, Jesus Christ, and angels. They believe that the Bible is a good book filled with important stories and lessons. And they believe that religion is very important in their lives. But this same group of people, including many professing Christians, also believe that people are inherently good; that our primary purpose is to enjoy life as much as possible. ⁴

Eighty-two percent of Americans (and a majority of evangelicals) believe that Benjamin Franklin's aphorism, "God helps those who help themselves," is a biblical quotation. A majority believe that "all people pray to the same god or spirit, no matter what name they use for that spiritual being," and that "if a person is generally good or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven." ⁵

(It should not surprise us then when President Bush says, "I believe that all the world, whether they be Muslim, Christian, or any other religion, prays to the same God. That's what I believe.") ⁶

After citing a series of reports, Barna concludes, "In short, the spirituality of America is Christian in name only."

We desire experience more than knowledge. We prefer choices to absolutes. We embrace preferences rather than truths. We seek comfort rather than growth. Faith must come on our terms or we reject it. We have enthroned ourselves as the final arbiters of righteousness, the ultimate rulers of our own experience and destiny. We are the Pharisees of the new millennium. ²

Among the false assumptions that are "killing the ministry" today are that "Americans have a firm understanding of the basic tenets of Christianity," that "people who believe in God believe in the God of Israel" known in Scripture, or that non-Christians are

interested in salvation, since most Americans "are relying instead on their own good deeds, their good character, or the generosity of God" apart from Christ. 8

Barna's studies suggest that most Americans value time and efficiency over everything else, minimizing long-term commitments, maintaining "independence and indi-viduality at all costs," even to the point of being skeptical of institutions, people, and authorities. After all, people are told every day, "You are unique," and that they shouldn't submit to the expectations of others. Above all, "*Trust your feelings to guide you*. Relying upon absolute principles places unrealistic limitations on you. Only you know what's right or best for you at any given moment, in those circumstances." Finally, "*Set goals and achieve them...Have fun...Stay in good health....Discover and revel in the purpose of your life.*" ⁹ These are the principal values according to Barna's surveys of American adults today. After expressing alarm at such trends, however, Barna himself advocates a market-driven outlook that reduces the Christian faith and mission to human-centered techniques of pragmatism and consumerism that might even have made Finney blush. There is this huge disconnect between what we say we believe and what we actually seem to believe when the rubber meets the road.

Reacting against a legalistic and self-righteous tendency in their childhood, many Americans have abandoned church altogether. Those who return often do so on their own terms. The message must be light and affirming; the form in which it is presented must be entertaining and inspirational. In this context, as *Newsweek* reported, churches "have developed a 'pick and choose' Christianity in which individuals take what they want...and pass over what does not fit their spiritual goals. What many have left behind is a pervasive view of sin." ¹⁰ A decade later, *Newsweek* added in yet another cover story on the search for the sacred:

Disguised in the secular language of psychotherapy, the search for the sacred has turned sharply inward-a private quest. The goal, over the last forty years, has been variously described as 'peace of mind,' 'higher consciousness,' 'personal transformation' or-in its most banal incarnation-'self-esteem.'...In this environment, many searching Americans flit from one tradition to the next, tasting now the nectar of this traditional wisdom, now of that. But, like butterflies, they remain mostly up in the air. ¹¹

Ironically, it was secular psychologist Karl Menninger who pointed out (in a book titled Whatever Became of Sin?) that the growing suppression of the reality of guilt in churches was actually contributing to neuroses rather than avoiding them. Not long ago, I read a Wall Street Journal article with a similar report, bearing the headline, "To Hell with Sin: When 'Being a Good Person' Excuses Everything." Isn't it slightly odd when the world has to complain that the churches are no longer talking about sin?

If we *feel* guilty, maybe it is because we really are guilty. To change the subject or downplay the seriousness of this condition actually keeps people from the liberating news that the gospel brings. If our real problem is bad feelings, then the solution is good feelings. The cure can only be as radical as the disease. Like any recreational drug, "Christianity Lite" can make people feel better for the moment, but it does not reconcile

sinners to God.

So while secular psychologists like Menninger are writings books about sin, many Christian leaders are converting sin-a condition from which we cannot liberate ourselvesinto dysfunction and salvation into recovery. In his best-seller, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Philip Rieff describes how pop-psychology has transformed our entire worldview, including religion. "Christian man was born to be saved," he writes. "Psychological man is born to be pleased." ¹²

"How can I, a sinner, be right before a holy God?" is simply off the radar in a therapeutic mindset. Once the self is enthroned as the source, judge, and goal of all of life, the gospel need not be denied; it's beside the point. But people need to see-for their own good-that self-realization, self-fulfillment, and self-help are all contemporary twists on an old heresy, which Paul identified as "works-righteousness."

Diagnosing the Illness: "Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism"

Americans have always been "can-do" people. Pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, we assume that we are good people who could do better if we just had the right methods and instructions. Add to this the triumph of the therapeutic in popular culture and we end up with "moralistic, therapeutic deism."

Besides psychologists, sociologists are documenting the fact that Christianity in America-including evan-gelicalism-is less interested in truth than in therapy and in attracting consumers than in making disciples. James Davison Hunter, Robert Bellah, Wade Clark Roof, and numerous others have made these points in their extensive studies of religion in America. However, there are two relatively recent sociologists who have contributed significantly to the spiritual condition that I am highlighting in this article and the following sidebar: Christian Smith and Marsha Witten.

As noted above, from 2001 to 2005, University of North Carolina (now Notre Dame) sociologist Christian Smith led a team in a remarkable study of teen spirituality in America today. From his extensive interviews Smith concluded that the dominant form of religion or spirituality of American young people today is "moralistic, therapeutic deism." It is difficult to define this somewhat amorphous spirituality, especially since, ironically, "22 percent of teen 'deists' in our survey reported feeling very or extremely close to God (the God they believe is not involved in the world today)." ¹³ Apparently, God's involvement is restricted to the inner sphere of one's private world.

Smith observed that most teens-including those reared in evangelical churches who said that their faith is "very important" and makes a big difference in their lives-are "stunningly inarticulate" concerning that actual content of that faith. ¹⁴ "Interviewing teens," he relates, "one finds little evidence that the agents of religious socialization in this country"-i.e., parents, pastors, and teachers-"are being highly effective and successful with the majority of their young people." ¹⁵ In contrast to previous generations that at least had some residual knowledge of the Bible and basic Christian teachings, it seems

that there is very little serious ability to state, much less to reflect upon and examine their beliefs, much less to relate them to daily life. Many young people seem to be living on the hype and the familiar circle of friends in the youth group, both of which eventually lose their influence, especially in college.

Smith defines "moralistic, therapeutic deism" as expressing this sort of working theology:

"God created the world."

"God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and most world religions."

"The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."

"God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."

"Good people go to heaven when they die." 16

The sense one gets from reading Smith's study jives with my own anecdotal experience of popular religion in America today. Basically, the message is that God is nice, we are nice, so we should all be nice.

Do young people raised in evangelical homes and churches really believe this? According to Barna's reports-not to mention the studies of sociologists like Smith (as well as James Hunter, Wade Clark Roof, and others)-the tragic answer is yes. ¹⁷ This approach, Smith says, reflects similar studies of their parents' generation. Even Lutheran youths active in the church could not define "grace" or "justification," he says, pointing up the disparity between what churches say they believe and what they are actually communicating week in and week out. Smith pointed out that in the working theology of those he studied, "being religious is about being good and it's not about forgiveness....It's unbelievable the proportion of conservative Protestant teens who do not seem to grasp elementary concepts of the gospel concerning grace and justification....It's across all traditions." ¹⁸

Whatever churches *say* they believe, the incoherent answers offered by those entrusted to their ministry further substantiate my argument that a moralistic religion of self-salvation is our default setting as fallen creatures. If we are not explicitly and regularly taught out of it, we will always turn the message of God's rescue operation into a message of self-help.

A Theological Diagnosis

The theological term for this malady is "Pelagianism." A fourth-century British monk, Pelagius was appalled by the immorality he saw when he arrived in Rome, the center of Christendom. Assuming that the emphasis of the African bishop Augustine on human helplessness and divine grace was at the root, Pelagius and his followers denied original sin. Sin is not a universal human condition, but simply a choice that each of us makes. With our free-will, we can choose to follow Adam's bad example or Jesus' good example. Although it was condemned by more church councils than any heresy, Pelagianism has always been a perennial threat. After all, it is our most natural theology.

While affirming that it is our own power to be good or bad-and so merit eternal life or death-semi-Pelagianism nevertheless believed that some assistance of divine grace was necessary. Arminianism, named after a late sixteenth-century Dutch theologian who rejected Calvinism, was nevertheless one more step removed from Pelagian convictions, affirming the necessity of grace. Nevertheless, Arminianism still holds that salvation is a cooperative effort of God and human beings.

Ever since the Second Great Awakening, especially evident in the message and methods of evangelist Charles G. Finney, American Protestantism has been more Pelagian than Arminian. In fact, Arminian theologian Roger Olson has recently made a similar point. ¹⁹

Denying original sin, Finney asserted that we are only guilty and corrupt when we choose to sin. ²⁰ Christ's work on the cross could not have paid our debt, but could only serve as a moral example and influence to persuade us to repent. "If he had obeyed the law as our substitute, then why should our own return to personal obedience be insisted upon as a sine qua non of our salvation?" ²¹ The atonement is simply "an incentive to virtue." Rejecting the view that "the atonement was a literal payment of a debt," Finney can only concede, "It is true, that the atonement, of itself, does not secure the salvation of any one." ²²

Justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness is not only "absurd," said Finney, but undermined all motivation for personal holiness. The new birth is not a divine gift, but the result of a rational choice to turn from sin to obedience. Christians can perfectly obey God in this life if they choose, and only in this way are they justified. In fact, "full present obedience is a condition of justification." No one can be justified "while sin, any degree of sin, remains in him." ²³ Finney declared concerning the Reformation formula, "simultaneously justified and sinful....This error has slain more souls, I fear, than all the universalism that ever cursed the world." For, "Whenever a Christian sins, he comes under condemnation and must repent and do his first works, or be lost." ²⁴

As has already been said, there can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law....The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption, for Christ's righteousness could do no more than justify himself. It can never be imputed to us....It was naturally impossible, then, for him to obey in our behalf. Representing the atonement as the ground of the sinner's justification has been a sad occasion of stumbling to many. ²⁵

Referring to "the framers of the Westminster Confession of faith," and their view of an imputed righteousness, Finney wondered, "If this is not antinomianism, I know not what is." ²⁶

It should be noted that these positions are far more radically antithetical to Reformation theology (with which evangelicalism supposedly identifies itself) than the condemnations of the Reformers' views by Rome at the Council of Trent. Finney's message was certainly

moralistic. Through various methods, the evangelist could "induce repentance," through constant crisis experiences that generated self-transformation. It was indeed a *therapeutic* orientation. And, as his critics observed, it was a system of religion that did not even seem to require God. Salvation and moral improvement were entirely in the hands of the evangelist and the convert. The *deistic* implications are also apparent.

Even if the gospel is formally affirmed, it becomes a tool for engineering personal and public life (salvation-by-works) rather than an announcement that God's just wrath toward us has been satisfied and his unmerited favor has been freely bestowed in Jesus Christ.

And this concern I have expressed is hardly limited to a few grumpy Calvinists and Lutherans. "Self-salvation is the goal of much of our preaching," according to United Methodist bishop William Willimon. ²⁷ Willimon perceives that much of contemporary preaching, whether mainline or evangelical, assumes that conversion is something that we generate through our own words and sacraments. "In this respect we are heirs of Charles G. Finney," who thought that conversion was not a miracle but a "'purely philosophical [i.e., scientific] result of the right use of the constituted means."

[W]e have forgotten that there was once a time when evangelists were forced to defend their 'new measures' for revivals, that there was once a time when preachers had to defend their preoccupation with listener response to their Calvinist detractors who thought that the gospel was more important than its listeners. I am here arguing that revivals are miraculous, that the gospel is so odd, so against the grain of our natural inclinations and the infatuations of our culture, that nothing less than a miracle is required in order for there to be true hearing. My position is therefore closer to that of the Calvinist Jonathan Edwards than to the position of Finney. ²⁸

Nevertheless, "The homiletical future, alas, lay with Finney rather than Edwards," leading to Barna, who writes,

Jesus Christ was a communications specialist. He communicated His message in diverse ways, and with results that would be a credit to modern advertising and marketing agencies....He promoted His product in the most efficient way possible: by communicating with the 'hot prospects.'...He understood His product thoroughly, developed an unparalleled distribution system, advanced a method of promotion that has penetrated every continent, and offered His product at a price that is within the grasp of every consumer (without making the product so accessible that it lost its value). ²⁹

The question that naturally arises in the face of such remarks is whether it is possible to say that Jesus made anything new.

"Alas," adds Willimon, "most 'evangelistic' preaching I know about is an effort to drag people even deeper into their subjectivity rather than an attempt to rescue them from it." Our real need, whether we feel it or not, is that we systematically distort and ignore the truth. This is why we need "an external word." 30 "So in a sense, we don't discover the

gospel, it discovers us. 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (John 15:16)." ³¹ Willimon concludes, "The story is euangelion, good news, because it is about grace. Yet it is also news because it is not common knowledge, not what nine out of ten average Americans already know. The gospel doesn't come naturally. It comes as Jesus." ³²

A Discourse of Resistance

A "discourse of resistance" is called for in these circumstances, but we have to be careful on this score. There is, of course, an anti-modernist spirit whose strategy of resistance is as dangerous as it is simplistic. The enemy is easily identified: secular humanism, public schools, Democrats, liberals, and gays; or on the other side of the aisle, fundamentalism, Christian schools, Republicans, conservatives, and patriarchalists. And since culture-our shared public life-is reduced to the spectacle of politics, the only way to resist is to win the culture wars.

The discourse of resistance I am suggesting, however, concerns the recovery of Christian faith and practice within the church itself. It begins not only by challenging weak views of God, sin, and grace, but the plausibility structures, paradigms, or worldviews that make biblical views increasingly incomprehensible even for most Christian laypeople and pastors.

People remain hopelessly trapped within their own inner psyche and resources, suppressing the truth about themselves that might drive them to Christ. No longer objectively guilty before a holy God, they feel only a sense of guilt or shame that they should deny by changing the subject to something lighter and more upbeat. No longer saved from damnation-which is the source of their deepest sense of anxiety-they are now saved from unpleasantness. We are the walking dead, forgetful that our designer-label fashions of religion and morality are really a death shroud. To paraphrase Jesus, we go through life like corpses with lipstick, not even aware that all of our makeovers and self-improvement are just cosmetic (Matt. 23:25-28).

Our fig leaves may have become more sophisticated (and expensive), but they are no more successful at covering our nakedness in God's presence than the homespun wardrobe of our first parents. Not only our sins, but "our righteousness is like filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). Isaiah 59 records the court trial: "Yahweh versus Israel." Although the people have complained that so many calamities have unjustly fallen upon them, the prophet as God's attorney exposes the ones bringing the complaint as perpetrators rather than victims: "Their cobwebs are useless for clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their deeds are evil deeds, and the acts of violence are in their hands" (vv. 6-7). Only after the evidence is brought forward do the people confess their sin and recognize that they have brought God's judgment upon themselves (vv. 9-15). In this situation, the Judge, seeing "that there was no one to intervene," took it upon himself to don the garments of battle and win the salvation of his people at his own expense. "The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,' declares the Lord" (vv. 16-20). The church has not only allowed us to change the subject; it has changed the subject for us.

It is the false prophets who "dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (Jer. 8:11). "They fill you with false hopes," he adds. "They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They keep saying to those who despise me, 'The Lord says: You will have peace'" (Jer. 23:16-17). It is not compassion for the people or zeal for God's house, but their own thirst for popularity that renders the false prophets constitutionally incapable of telling the truth about the crisis.

Enclosed in our own narrow world of personal "spin," we are never introduced to the real world created by God's Word. Instead of something new and surprising that might actually bring genuine transformation at our roots, we hear only more of the background musak that softly affirms the status quo. Instead of being brought to the end of our rope so that we will let go of all other securities and fall into the merciful arms of God, we are encouraged to have another go at saving ourselves (however defined) with God's help. Both sin and redemption are trivialized when we write the script.

Yet, finally, we will have to examine ourselves and our own capitulations to the spirit of the age that Paul captured so poignantly in 2 Timothy 3. There are no easy targets or silver bullets. We are the problem. As the prophets pointed out with great seriousness, Israel's apostasy was evident not by a mass exodus from public worship, but by the corruption of worship and the standards of the covenant for human relationships. Israel had become like the nations, yet wondered why God was so upset.

Many of the same people who decry moral relativism and religious pluralism in the culture, have-in their thinking, ministry, and personal life-unwittingly adopted the habits of modernization that are more directly responsible for relativism in the first place. George Barna, for example, routinely decries the lack of any obvious disparity between Christians and the secular culture, while he accepts the most secular assumptions of the self as sovereign consumer. If God is not the focus of our church life, why should we expect the culture to take its cues from God's script?

If most churchgoers cannot tell us anything specific about the God they consider meaningful-or explain basic doctrines of creation in God's image, original sin, the atonement, justification, sanctification, the means of grace, or the hope of glory-then the blame can hardly be placed at the feet of secular humanists.

When our churches assume the gospel, reduce it to slogans, or confuse it with moralism and hype, it is not surprising that the type of spirituality we fall back on is "moralistic, therapeutic deism." In a therapeutic worldview, the self is always sovereign. The great questions of life do not concern what an external authority has determined to be good, true, and beautiful, but one's own sense of well-being and fulfillment. God is there to be used as needed, but does not surprise, contradict, judge, or disrupt our lust to control our own lives and destinies. Accommodating this false religion is not love-either of God or neighbor-but sloth, depriving human beings of genuine liberation and depriving God of the glory that is his due. The self must be dethroned. That's the only way out.

Footnotes

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1 Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of
American Teenagers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 162-171, 258, 262. Back
2 George Barna, The Second Coming of the Church (Nashville: Word, 1998), p. 7. Back
3 Barna, p. 8. Back
4 Barna, p. 21. Back
5 Barna, pp. 21-22. Back
6 President George W. Bush in an interview with Al Arabiya (4 October 2007), reported by Mollie Ziegler
Hemingway, "Between the Times," Modern Reformation (January/February 2008). Back
7 Barna, p. 23. Back
8 Barna, pp. 25-28. Back
9 Barna, pp. 60-61. Back
10 Kenneth Woodward, Newsweek (September 1984), p. 26. Back
11 Kenneth Woodward, Newsweek (November 1994), p. 62. Back
12 Philip Rieff, The Triumph of the Therapeutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. x-xii. Back
13 Smith and Denton, p. 42. Back
14 Smith explored his findings with us on the White Horse Inn radio broadcast (available at whitehorse
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15 Smith and Denton, p. 27. Back
16 Smith and Denton, pp. 162-163. Back
17 See especially James D. Hunter, Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1987), chapter 2. Back
18 Interview by Michael Cromartie, "What American Teenagers Believe: A Conversation with Christian
Smith," Books & Culture (January/February 2005), p. 10. Back
19 Roger Olson, Arminian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), p. 28 (including footnote 20).
Furthermore, I have been amazed that Arminian friends like Methodist theologian Thomas Oden have
defended core evangelical (i.e., Reformation) teachings like justification even while some conservative
Protestants seem to be losing their interest in the doctrine. Clearly, the theological divide in our day is less
denominational than it is theological. Back
20 Charles G. Finney, Systematic Theology (reprinted, Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976), pp. 31, 179-180, 236.
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21 Finney, p. 206. Back
22 Finney, p. 209. Back
23 Finney, p. 46. Back
24 Finney, p. 57. Back
25 Finney, pp. 321-322. Back
26 Finney, pp. 321-322. Back
27 William Willimon, Preaching to the Baptized (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 53. Back
28 Willimon, p. 20. Back
29 Willimon, p. 21, citing George Barna, Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About
Church Growth (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), p. 50. Back
30 Willimon, p. 38. Back
31 Willimon, p. 43. Back
32 Willimon, p. 52. Back
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