

A “Funeral” for Christendom

Presented as a Sermon at the
First Church of Christ UCC
In Longmeadow, Massachusetts
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Created by Pastors Mike Bennett and Curt Preston

The Scene: During the singing of “Amazing Grace,” the front of the church is set up to resemble a funeral service: flowers on a stand, and a framed mirror displayed as would be a portrait of the deceased. Maudlin organ music is played following the hymn. A member of the congregation, dressed as a minister, comes to the lectern to give the eulogy.

A Eulogy for Christendom

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to pay our respects and say our final farewell to Christendom. As presiding pastor today, it is my honor to deliver this eulogy for our dearly departed companion. Following my remarks, we will hear from four people who have known Christendom in different ways. As we often do at funerals, we benefit from hearing a variety of voices and considering more than one perspective.

Before I talk about Christendom’s life, I need to acknowledge the pastoral and emotional reality that is present here today. Some of you may be surprised that we haven’t held this funeral service sooner. You haven’t thought about Christendom in years and you may not even think this ritual is necessary. Others of you may be shocked to hear the news of Christendom’s demise. To you, Christendom still seems very much alive. And still others have been faithfully attending our friend during the time of hospice care—never giving up ultimate hope, but also being realistic in acknowledging the accumulation of symptoms. Each of us brings to this service our own unique relationship with Christendom. Therefore the process of grieving will be different for each person. As your pastor, I respect those differences. Your church is here for all of you.

Though some of the dates and details of Christendom’s life are complicated and open to interpretation, I believe we can sum up the centuries in a fairly clear and orderly fashion. Christendom was born in 313 A.D. Before that time, Christendom did not exist. *Christianity* existed, but it was not the same thing. The Roman Emperor Constantine had a vision and went into battle behind a banner with a Christian insignia instead of the customary imperial marking. He won that battle and he didn’t consider it a coincidence! Christianity did not become the official religion of Rome until a bit later, but the wartime

conversion of Constantine brought to Christianity a heretofore unknown level of toleration and imperial favor.

Constantine's policy was to unite the Christian church and the secular state by the closest possible ties.¹ In this union, Christendom was born. Before this time Christians were a minority group, often persecuted by the surrounding culture and seldom supported or assisted in their faith. All at once, that changed. Christendom grew stronger as the Roman Empire expanded and together they survived some dark times. Christendom lived on as a friend and companion of the emerging Western European culture that took the place once held by Rome.

Christendom's very name reminds us of this history. Christendom comes from combining the words "Christ" and "dominion." If Christendom was anything, Christendom was a *powerful* personality. Though Christianity was of humble origins, Christendom was born in a palace rather than a stable.

In the next phase of Christendom's life, there was a lot of adapting. Though one empire was replaced by many modern states, Christendom changed with the times. The Protestant Reformation transformed Christendom, but Christendom lived on. There was a "Radical Reformation" that tried to disown Christendom, but those folks were never very popular or effective in worldly affairs.²

The Christendom known best to this congregation came later, after a "marriage" of sorts. Christendom came to the New World on the Mayflower and took on a married name: American Christendom. This is the Christendom we have known—though we often leave off the first name.

American Christendom was both different from and similar to its European incarnation. Though this country was founded on principles that separated church and state, Christianity was nonetheless the *culturally* established religion. In New England, the clergy were influential in politics and in the formation of the new nation. These traditions carried on for a long time, with the secular culture helping the churches by doing things like teaching prayer in schools and limiting sports on Sundays. In return, the churches helped the culture build hospitals and take care of the poor. Christendom flourished like this until just a half century ago. But things were changing. Christendom began to falter as the hammer of modern reason³ and technology continued to pound all traditions, as new immigrants from non-European nations brought faiths other than Christianity, and as authority of all kinds shifted away from institutions to individuals. Christendom was mortally wounded.⁴

But when, exactly, did Christendom die? I believe I know the answer to this question, but I must be honest and tell you that not everyone agrees with me. A few people think Christendom still has a pulse, while others think the body is well into the

stage of smelly deterioration. Here's my answer: Christendom died, at least here in Longmeadow, in 1994. That was the year that the Big Y Supermarket first opened on Sunday mornings. Nothing better symbolized Christendom than stores being closed on Sunday. They opened on Sunday afternoons in 1982, but in 1994 the last of the cultural supports were withdrawn. Christianity was on its own. Christendom was dead.

And so, dear friends, today we acknowledge this death and remember one who lived a very long life. Any funeral brings a certain amount of sadness and anger. Death is an emotional thing. But our faith is a resurrection faith—out of death comes new life. And, while it may feel like Christianity itself has died, it has not. Christianity and Christendom have had overlapping, but not identical, life stories. Let us say good-bye, respectfully but honestly, to American Christendom. And may we find, even in this death, a glimpse of resurrection hope. Amen.

(pause) Now, let us hear from four people who knew Christendom. I invite them to come forward to this lectern, one at a time.

One of the pastors, dressed in a scarf as an old woman, comes forward from the congregation to offer the first remembrance of Christendom. She knew Christendom well and misses it a great deal.

Christendom, what can I say about you. You were great. Life made sense when you were around. I really miss you. You did so many things: you brought about the YMCA, you started multiple charity organizations and schools. You got along with everyone. You taught us to be “nice and good,” you valued civility, and you didn't really deal too much with the *details* of faith. Besides, everyone pretty much knew what it was to be a Christian. The church's youth group was the town's youth group, and it didn't really matter what you believed. You wanted everyone to feel included, not matter what, and it seems like most people did.

We didn't really think much about the mission field, especially not there at the end, since pretty much everyone we knew was a Christian. The church supported the community and the community supported the church. There weren't sharp divisions between the two, and I liked it that way. I'm not sure what things will be like now that you are gone, but I hope it will be okay.

One of the pastors, dressed in a rather “loud” sport coat and using a cane, comes forward from the congregation to offer the second remembrance of Christendom. He was a pastoral colleague of Christendom. He uses the pulpit rather than the lectern.

I worked as a pastor with Christendom. This is really hard for me, to finally say good-bye. I'm unsettled. I don't fully understand how this all happened. It seemed like we were doing fine, and all of the sudden, attendance leveled off, giving decreased, and now its hard to get people to serve on committees. It wasn't like that before. As a pastor, I had some weight. People listened to me. Not just you church people—people in the town, even if they weren't part of our church, they knew me and respected me.

I could pretty much count on anyone who moved to town would come to our church, I mean if they were Christian and weren't Catholic. Sometimes they came with their bosses from Mass Mutual. Most people definitely joined a church, even if they didn't attend regularly. The schools supported what we did, and we definitely didn't have to compete with sports (*pounds pulpit*). Nothing happened on Sundays but church and family. I'm not saying it was perfect—there was an element of pride—but it was really clear where we stood. There was a kind of unity between the church and the community. We helped them, they helped us. We could have the pledge of allegiance side by side with a prayer and no one even batted an eye. Nobody got upset when I used "Thees" and "Thous" in my prayers or called God "Father."

Back before I retired, if someone from our church was in the hospital, the hospital would call and let me know. I didn't have to ask; they would tell me. Now I hear there are laws against that! And they gave me a special parking place. It's a shame it's gotten so complicated. I heard that Old First downtown might have to sell their building. That was the mother church. Otis Maxfield used to pack the place! Twelve hundred seats weren't enough. If they can't make it down there, you wonder who's next. I guess I can at least say we had a good run.

Some days, I think if these new pastors would just visit more and relate the gospel more to everyday life, Christendom might return. But, deep down, I know things have changed for good. I'm sure God has a plan, but I'm glad it's not my job to figure it out.

One of the pastors, dressed now in a sweatshirt and baseball cap, comes from outside the church, takes off his coat and offers the third remembrance of Christendom. He doesn't come to church and doesn't miss Christendom. He's not sad.

I don't really feel like I belong here today. I didn't really know Christendom well, in fact, all I really know is what my parents and grandparents have said, so I guess I'm not really sure what to say. It's tough to miss what you didn't know. I hope it isn't too harsh to say I'm kinda glad Chris is gone. I've never joined a church. I'm not really sure what "joining" a church even means. I went to church school here. Does that make me a member? Becoming a member never really appealed to me, and sitting on some committee doesn't really get me going either.

It isn't that I don't want to be a part of something, but I want it to feed me. Maybe it is selfish, but I want to know that my participation matters. I want to be involved personally, not just talking about doing something, or giving money to some organization that does good deeds. It's hard because I'm not exactly sure what I believe and it seems like the church is only for people who already know. It seems like there aren't really ways to help me learn to be a Christian. Maybe now that Christendom is gone, someone will figure out how to have church be a place that helps form me as a Christian.

I'm excited about the new possibilities. I know it may be tough for some, but the thought of being a part of a new way of being church sounds good. I think it will be good, if we can figure out how to do it.

One of the pastors, dressed now in casual "Hawaiian" shirt, comes forward from the back of the congregation. He's middle-aged and will miss some aspects of Christendom, but not all.

It's strange because I find myself somewhere in the middle. Unlike that fellow that was just here, I knew Christendom—especially as a kid. But it feels like this has been coming for a while. Some days I'm excited, other days I'm nervous and scared. I want there to be a church for me, and for my kids. I realize things need to change, but I don't want it to be so different that it doesn't seem like church.

In some ways, I never really thought about all this until today. I didn't have to. I grew up in a family that went to church sometimes, but not all the time. I remember my parents being a part of things at church, and I was too, but it was almost like separate worlds. What we did on Sundays rarely seemed to carry over into the rest of the week. Right now things seem so much in flux I don't know what to feel. Even if things weren't perfect before, you kind of knew where you stood with Christendom. I always knew the church would be there when I needed it, for me and for my kids. Now I'm not so sure. I guess I would say things were clearer with Christendom around. Now it is just confusing.

I see some of my friends going to those new start churches—the ones that meet in old theaters and auditoriums. They seem to really have something going, but it just doesn't seem like "church" to me. A *lot* of my other friends have left the church all together. They say it doesn't really matter. These are kids who were in youth group with me and everything, but for whatever reason, the church didn't hook them.

I've thought about leaving myself, to be honest, but there is something about it that keeps drawing me back. I feel a sense of duty and I like the structure it gives my life. But lately I've been feeling tired out. I've served on every committee. I've been

the Moderator—twice. My Dad taught me that these jobs were important. But, boy, it sure is a lot of long meetings!

I grew up with Christendom. It seems strange to say good-bye, but I know it is time. I just wish I knew what was coming next.

*The organ music resumes...*⁵

¹ See “Constantine The Great,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2e, F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), page 338.

² Today their descendants can be seen doing “crazy” things like driving horse carriages, forgoing modern conveniences, and forgiving those who hurt them.

³ See, for example, Lezek Kowakowski, *Modernity On Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁴ This history, and many of the concepts of this eulogy, are helpfully explicated by Anthony B. Robinson in “It’s A Whole New World: An Online Course on Church and Culture in a New Time,” which can be found at www.uccvitality.org. For a more in-depth discussion, see Robinson’s, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003).

⁵ Further implications will be discussed in a follow-up sermon on November 19 and during a congregational discussion following that service.