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## A Response from the Authors of the Worldly Church

Leonard Allen

Richard Hughes  
richard.hughes@messiah.edu

Mike Weed

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# THE WORLDLY CHURCH

## THE AUTHORS' RESPONSE

### FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

Leonard Allen

The four reviews of our book represent the kind of serious and thoughtful analysis we hoped the book would elicit. For this I am grateful to the reviewers. I find many of their insights provocative and helpful, both extending our thought and challenging it. I also disagree strongly with a number of their points — e.g., with Shaun Casey's assumption that "one cannot write a history of the Churches of Christ before this century." This assumption — standard among many historians — shapes his overall interpretation of our work, skewing it in significant ways. Several such issues raised in these reviews call for response, but I shall focus only on two: the nature and influence of the Enlightenment and the role of the church in the world.

A couple of the reviewers quarrel with the extent to which we lay blame on the Enlightenment for our woes, or at least the way in which we characterize it. Tom Olbricht's point about the variety and complexity of the Enlightenment is well-taken. I recognize such complexity, particularly that the influence of the Enlightenment in America assumed a different shape than in Europe. Further, I certainly do not wish to indict the Enlightenment for all the modern, Western ills or dismiss its positive legacy.

The Enlightenment eradicated many false beliefs and superstitions that had characterized the pre-scientific age. Its great technological advances did much to relieve physical suffering and hardship. Its high regard for human liberty and its tolerance of diversity laid the foundation for modern democratic governments. Indeed, the very methods of critique that we employ in the book owe a considerable debt to the spirit of the Enlightenment.

Diogenes Allen has pointed to four basic principles forged in the Enlightenment which have become pillars of the modern mentality: (1) the assumption

that the idea of God is superfluous; (2) the assumption that morality and society can be founded on human reason and not on religion; (3) the belief in inevitable progress; and (4) the assumption that knowledge is inherently good.<sup>1</sup> It is not that the Enlightenment was all bad, but rather that these central principles of the Enlightenment unleashed secularizing forces that by the twentieth century had nearly run their course. We have now reached an advanced stage of secularization. Here the Enlightenment's narrow view of reason, confidence in scientific empiricism, and belief in the inherent goodness of knowledge begins to break down. Its shallowly-rooted sense of transcendent moral values fades so that people must now create their own values. What people once viewed as objective moral goodness clearly revealed in nature's laws "turns into the subjective goodness of getting what you want and enjoying it. Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. 'Being good' becomes 'feeling good.'"<sup>2</sup>

The point is that this modern mentality forged largely in the Enlightenment is now breaking down. We are moving into a postmodern age. As a result, as Diogenes Allen notes, "Theologians no longer need to labor in the tight, asphyxiating little world of the Enlightenment or to become premodern."<sup>3</sup> Thankfully we are not faced with the choice, on the one hand, of adopting the Enlightenment's narrow view of reason, of moral foundations, and of divine agency in the world or, on the other hand, of embracing a relativistic ontology. The way is now open for a fuller and richer synthesis of faith and reason.

**The Worldly Church** perhaps should have developed these issues with more depth and nuance — but then it probably would not have been a small "tract for the times" that many church leaders and concerned Christians actually read.

The second issue I wish to focus on is the role of the church in the world. Three of the reviewers raise important issues in this regard. Tom Olbricht wanted to see a stronger call for servanthood in the world; he noted that the "opposite of worldliness from a biblical

perspective is not to avoid the world and its ways, but godly servanthood in it." Shaun Casey is concerned that there is too little place in our theology "for grappling with the world as we encounter it." And John Stamps, using Niebuhr's famous categories, finds our position somewhat difficult to categorize (though he surmises a Christ-and-culture-in-paradox stance in our churches).

Here I want to extend and clarify the brief treatment of this issue in **The Worldly Church**. Niebuhr's typology provides a good place to start. It properly focuses on the church's necessary interaction with the world. It highlights the challenge of being **in** the world but not **of** the world. But, though useful as a tool of understanding, Niebuhr's typology has a fundamental problem. As John Howard Yoder and others have argued, it still retains the basic Constantinian assumption that the church must take responsibility for transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. Yoder argues that such a way of putting the issue presupposes the joining of church and world that occurred during the third and fourth centuries (symbolized by Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity). The church began to view itself as responsible for christianizing the social order and bringing all of society's institutions under the Christian umbrella. In this view, calls for Christians to withdraw or separate themselves from the culture are usually taken as signs of irresponsibility. Such a formulation of the problem, Yoder argues, misconstrues the biblical understanding of both the church and the world.<sup>4</sup> If one basically agrees with such an assessment — as I do — then one must fundamentally rethink how the church relates to the world. Some readers of **The Worldly Church** concluded that we were advocating a kind of Christ-against-culture stance and were calling for a sectarian withdrawal from culture. Here I want to press the case that the church can most effectively engage the world only as the church exists in sharp distinction from the world.

To focus this issue we must look more closely at the biblical understanding of the "world." In the New Testament, "world" can refer to the universe as a whole or to planet earth and its inhabitants (e.g. Rom. 1:8; Acts 17:24). But it is used most commonly, not in reference to a physical place, but to a system of values or a social order opposed to God.

The admonition in 1 John 2:15-16 puts it sharply: "Do not love the world, or the things in the world. When one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world."

Here the "world" is the realm of enmity with God. It is "the sum of the divine creation which has been shattered by the fall, which stands under the judgment of God, and in which Jesus Christ appears as redeemer." It is human society as it falls under the sway of the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life"—or as C.H. Dodd rendered these phrases, society "with its sensuality, [its] superficial-

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- Leonard Allen

ity and pretentiousness, its materialism and its egoism."<sup>5</sup>

Thus the "world" is not primarily a place or material realm. It is not equivalent to created nature or to all human culture. Rather the "world" is the realm of unbelief, all of God's creation that has not yet come under God's dominion. It appears in and through all human culture. It manifests itself in everyone—including Christians—who choose not to profess Christ's lordship and make his way their way.

In New Testament perspective, two realms (or aeons) exist side by side in human history. One is the world of sin and death, the other is the new humanity which makes up the body of Christ. Each of these two realms manifests itself socially or culturally. The old realm or "world" shows itself in the structures of human society in general (with its materialism, sensuality, racial barriers, economic conflicts, and constant declarations of human autonomy). The new realm shows itself in the church and the new social order it creates.

This new order (now becoming visible in the church) must be kept uncontaminated by the old (the "world"). It must maintain a distinctive quality of existence. It must uphold radically different values, treat people in radically different ways, and nurture within its community a different view of reality. It must maintain an ethos where following the way of the cross becomes intelligible.

This means that the church must remain in a significant sense a withdrawn community, living in opposition to the "world." When we say that, however, we must speak carefully, for Paul does not instruct the church to close itself off from the secular world or to cease all association with the immoral people of the world (1 Cor. 5:9-10). There must be separation, to be sure, "but not of the usual kind. The church is not prohibited from entering the world; the world is excluded from entering the church."<sup>6</sup>

We easily think that we can be God's holy and separate people by shutting ourselves off from the world or isolating ourselves from it — and Churches of Christ have too often done that. But it is never that simple. For the "world" is both without us and within us. Its boundary line runs through every human heart.

The church thus does not simply withdraw from the "world." But it does stand apart from the

“world” as a distinct entity. Rejecting the Constantinian assumption of Christianity’s majority status, we must assume that the faithful Christian community will always occupy a minority status in its culture—even in a so-called “Christian” culture. This separate, minority status does not mean isolating oneself from society or failing to care for it, nor does it mean self-righteously elevating oneself above other sinful human beings. To the contrary, this sharp disavowal of the “world” and its values is done for the sake of the “world.” We form a separate, distinctive community not to isolate and protect ourselves but because we believe that we can best serve the “world” by being the church.

By becoming a distinctive and set-apart community, the church serves the world in at least two important ways.

*First, in taking its stance against the world, the church enables the world to see its true plight or lostness.* As the realm of estrangement from God, the world lives by a clouded and distorted vision of reality. For this reason the world does not know it is the world. It cannot name its most basic problem—rebellion against God and declaration of its own autonomy. In the language of John, it lives in darkness. Thus, as Stanley Hauerwas has written, “the church serves the world by giving the world the means to see itself truthfully.”<sup>7</sup>

The church’s first and highest calling, therefore, is to be the church. It shuns violence and retaliation, and thus helps the world see the way of peace. It eschews control and manipulation of people, and thus shows the world the way of respect and equality. It breaks down racial and social distinctions in its midst, and thus shows the world the sinfulness and injustice of its divisions between people. It lets go of its possessions with joy and gladness, and thus exposes the world’s idolatrous attachment to its money and possessions.

The church thus serves as the “light of the world.” Through its light the church summons all people to the praise of God. In this way at least part of the world may be able to recognize itself as “world.” Part of the world may be able to see its lostness, its deception and chaos. At the same time, however, much of the world will scorn the church for attempting to show the world its true nature.

*Second, in taking its stance against the world, the church creates an environment (or ethos) where people can develop the skills and virtues necessary to serve the world in sacrificial ways.* The world, because it is the realm of estrangement from God, the realm of self-seeking and autonomy, cannot provide the training ground where people learn to follow the way of the cross. Around us today we see an immense confusion concerning the proper way to live. The spirit of our age is marked by a relentless assertion of the self, a swelling contempt for self-restraint. The spirit of the age is the spirit of aggressive individualism. Prophets of individualism rise up, promising people that they can “have it all” through bold self-assertion.

Such a world, of course, has its codes of ethics, its standards of social decorum, and its admonitions to service and goodwill. Such counsels do indeed check unrestrained self-assertion and elicit a measure of goodwill. And for that we should be thankful. But in the final analysis, the world’s ethical counsels almost invariably hark back to self-interest and personal advancement. They inevitably tie regard for others to one’s own egocentric gratification. So (the advice usually runs), if the narrow fixation on self fails to make one happy, then one should seek to find happiness by serving others. Or as one psychologist put it, “The task . . . is to train persons to act for the benefits of another because it is in their own self-interest.”<sup>8</sup>

Such advice is about the best the world has to offer. Such training is about the best it can provide. If we are to gain the skills and virtues required to follow the way of the cross, we will have to acquire them in a very different training ground. We will require a community that stands in sharp contrast to the dominant social order. For Jesus’ way calls for kinds of caring that in the eyes of the world seem reckless and ill-advised. It calls for kinds of loving concern that seem beyond the reasonable call of duty.

Jesus’ way calls, in short, for character traits and moral skills that appear either incomprehensible, foolish, or impossible to a world schooled primarily in the ethic of self-advancement. And indeed, Christians acknowledge that such traits and skills are impossible without the transforming power of the Holy Spirit that works in and through the body of Christ. Indeed, we acknowledge that the church can be the church only through the power of the Spirit.

## MOVING BEYOND THE SYNDROME OF THE WORLDLY CHURCH

Richard Hughes

John Stamps and Mike Casey put their fingers squarely on one of the most surprising aspects of the career of *The Worldly Church*, namely, the fact that it has received such diverse readings and interpretations from both the traditionalists and non-traditionalists in Churches of Christ.

There are two themes, however, which are fundamental to this book and which we sought to make abundantly clear. First, secularization—as we used that term—denotes primary orientation toward this world, its objectives, and its ambitions, and reliance on human ability and progress to achieve those ends. Clearly, such a perspective stands in marked contrast to the conviction that ultimate reality is to be found not in the affairs of this world at all, but rather in the one who transcends this world and stands in judgment on all human ambitions and achievements.

While I, for one, continue to feel that the Enlightenment was a watershed in the history of the West which profoundly accentuated secularization, Tom Olbricht clearly is on target when he suggests that the real root of secularization lies in the heart of humankind who persist in worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. In this sense, secularization has been with us always.

The other theme, central to this book, is that our movement, as an authentic child of the Enlightenment, was born and bred in a spirit of self-reliance and profoundly oriented toward human achievement. For this reason, secularization has dominated our movement from its inception. For many years, the themes of self-reliance and human achievement took the form of legalism and sectarianism—attitudes still too much with us. The current zeal to meet “felt needs” is only the most recent **incarnation** of a fundamental outlook that has been with us since the early nineteenth century. In fact, there is no one in whom one can perceive the spirit of self-reliance and faith in human progress more clearly than Alexander Campbell himself. A case in point: when some suggested that God, through his initiative, might bring the world to an end in the year 1858, Campbell objected, not so much on the grounds that no one knows that day or hour, but rather on the grounds that human progress had not yet run its course. He argued for the “incomparably paramount” consideration that

this world is but as it were awaking from sleep . . . [that] it was but yesterday that the mariner’s compass was discovered, that printing was shown to be practicable, that steam power was laughed at as an absurdity, and the electric telegraph ridiculed as the hobby of a vagarian’s brain. . . . We have too much faith in progress . . . to subscribe to the doctrines of these theological gentlemen who hint the last days are at hand.<sup>1</sup>

**The Worldly Church** sought and seeks to make clear that secularization is a phenomenon intertwined with our movement from its outset. To portray the book as arguing that secularization took its rise within the last twenty years, or to portray its authors as looking to the earlier years of the twentieth century as a golden age for Churches of Christ, is simply a misreading of the text.

On the other hand, while the spirit of self-reliance has been a dominant theme among Churches of Christ since the early nineteenth century, I do not wish to portray our movement in these terms alone. For one also finds, running throughout the history of our movement since the earliest years of the nineteenth century, another theological tradition whose emphasis came down squarely on the frailty of humankind and the sovereignty of a transcendent God. Often this perspective manifested itself in a strong doctrine of separation from the ambitions of the world; in a profound awareness of the Holy Spirit living and working in the lives of believers; in a keen anticipation of a mil-

lennium, brought about not by human progress (as with Campbell) but by the initiative of God; in a refusal to defend or participate in human governments on the grounds that Christians belong to a radically different Kingdom; and in its insistence that restoration at its best looks not so much to structural patterns of the primitive church as to the pattern of the cross of Christ which calls us to empty ourselves in the service of others.

The fountainhead of this perspective, at least in our movement, was Barton W. Stone. But the legal, sectarian, and self-reliant side of our heritage both overshadowed and absorbed the Stone tradition from an early date. Increasingly, the once glorious and radical vision of the upsidedown Kingdom of God came to signify only the “true church,” and the theme of separation from the world increasingly meant nothing more than separation from “the denominations.” Still and all, various dimensions of Stone’s perspective were kept alive through the years—sometimes in dynamic and powerful ways—by people like David Lipscomb, James A. Harding, J. N. Armstrong, R. H. Boll, Frank Rhodes, R. C. Bell, K. C. Moser, and Andy T. Ritchie, to name only a few. Some of these themes continue to be part of our heritage, and find expression today in treatises like those authored by Bill Love and Don Haymes in this issue of *Leaven*, and in Leonard Allen’s new book, **The Cruciform Church**.

The fact is, the history of our movement is essentially a tale of the ways in which the Campbell and Stone traditions intertwined with one another, often in ways that were theologically both inconsistent and contradictory.<sup>2</sup> As much as anything, the amalgamation of these two diverse perspectives has contributed to the institutional “identity crisis” which haunts so many in Churches of Christ today.

For those of us concerned with this “identity crisis,” our task is quite clear. Tom Olbricht has summarized that task simply by pointing to the words of the prophet Malachi (3:7): “Return to me.” The problem we face grows from the fact that there is much in our heritage—the sectarianism, the legalism, the self-reliance, and the negative approach to preaching described so well by Mike Casey—that contributes little or nothing to that return. How, then, can we heed the words of the prophet and at the same time find a place to stand in our own historic tradition? This is the dilemma that makes our “identity crisis” so acute. Further, what appears to be a paucity of resources to sustain this return is precisely what drives so many out of Churches of Christ into other traditions.

The “identity crisis” has its roots not only in the amalgamation of competing themes in the Stone and Campbell traditions, but also in the tension between the themes of restoration and unity that has plagued the movement from its inception. Indeed, while Disciples of Christ increasingly made Christian unity their central concern, so Churches of Christ increasingly made the ideal of restoration the core of their theological agenda. By the early years of the twentieth century, many—perhaps most—in Churches of Christ

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 had abandoned any serious interest in the theme of Christian unity except as a rhetorical device. So much for the first pillar of the movement.

Today, many who remain in Churches of Christ essentially reject the *second* bedrock assumption on which this movement was built, namely, the idea of restoration. Indeed, Shaun Casey is precisely on target when he writes that "the old language of restorationism is still trotted out by clergy and teach-

Churches of Christ indicates that this narrowing of the restitution focus to formal polity issues . . . may have contributed to discrediting the idea of restitution.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, people like Yoder and Franklin Littell<sup>4</sup> are intellectually serious champions of the restoration theme, though they stand well outside the tradition of Churches of Christ. They champion this theme because it contains, in their view, the seeds of radical discipleship and allegiance to the upside-down Kingdom.

For these reasons, it seems to me that the current zeal to reject the restoration sentiment out of hand is entirely wrong headed, contributes nothing to resolving the "identity crisis," and in fact compounds the problem. We should tend, instead, to the task of rethinking the restoration theme, seriously asking what this theme might contribute to the task of radical discipleship in a fallen world. And we should tend as well to our own history, for we may discover there unexpected resources which can give us a place to stand within the context of our own tradition. If we relentlessly pursue this kind of work and finally, at the end of the process, come up shorthanded, we may well then be justified in rejecting both the restoration ideal and the tradition of Churches of Christ. But until we pursue these tasks, rejection of the tradition and theological presuppositions of Churches of Christ, explicitly or implicitly, is simply premature.

Further, if this generation can discover a meaning in restorationism that transcends mere polity concerns and connects more closely and directly with the central message of the Christian faith—the cross of Christ—we may at the same time help rejuvenate the old ideal of Christian unity which was so important in the earliest years of our movement.

Finally, however, a word of disclaimer: recovery and retention of our historic identity simply for the sake of perpetuating a tradition has no claim, in my view, to legitimacy. Our first allegiance is not to "our tradition," but rather to the gospel and to the claims the gospel makes on us for radical discipleship. If the gospel of Christ and the discipleship it calls on us to adopt can find expression through our tradition, that is all to the good. But if not, we really have no right to exist.

Our first commitment, therefore, must be to the Christian gospel, and this means a renewed commitment to a serious, fresh, and open-minded investigation of scripture. Our historic dependence on scripture, after all, is the greatest resource for renewal available to Churches of Christ. If we can exploit that resource, there is hope that we can move beyond the syndrome of "the worldly church," resolve our "identity crisis," and discover afresh resources latent in our own tradition for serious Christianity in a fallen world.

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**-Richard Hughes**

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ers on those occasions when the boundaries of doctrine or acceptable practice are threatened, but the hermeneutical calculus of explicitly restoring the New Testament Church has long since disappeared among the laity in most mainline Churches of Christ."

Whether one agrees with the validity of the restoration theme or not, it is nonetheless the case that when a religious community loses touch with its root metaphors, it has reached a crisis of incalculable proportions, whether those in the community are prepared to admit that crisis or not.

Indeed, the much discussed "hermeneutic crisis" is fundamentally a symptom of our "identity crisis." If we don't know who we are or what we are about, how can we possibly approach scripture with any purposeful and informed hermeneutic?

But the other pressing question has to do with the validity of the restoration theme itself. On the one hand, one could well argue—as many have—that the restoration theme is inherently flawed. On the other hand, one also could argue that the restoration theme is nothing more than an appeal to the New Testament, and that its flaws are not intrinsic but rather grow from the ways in which restorationism is employed. This is precisely what John Howard Yoder, the distinguished Mennonite theologian, argued fifteen years ago when he suggested that Churches of Christ may be responsible for helping to discredit a worthy ideal.

It can be argued that the later history of the

## OF CROSSES, CLOWNS, AND DOG FIGHTS

Michael Weed

I commend the respondents for the seriousness with which they have taken their task. Before addressing their comments, however, I would like to make two brief observations.

First, **The Worldly Church** was not intended to be a full theological statement. From the outset it was envisioned as a "tract for the times." We simply attempted to call certain neglected issues to attention. Among other things, we hoped to raise the conversation above preoccupation with internecine arguments on the one hand and shallow discussions of "ministry technique" on the other. We hoped to offer a provisional framework for addressing the issue of secularization and to bring others into the discussion. It is my impression that we succeeded in encouraging thought about the direction of the church as a whole and in bringing about more serious recognition of the subtle ways our environment is making inroads into the very life of the church.

Second, one common (and baffling) response has been the charge that we generalized on the basis of a few large churches. We have, in fact, called attention to a process long-recognized to be at work in American religion -- perhaps as early as Tocqueville's observations on American religiosity (ca. 1835), and more recently noted in Peter DeVries' **Mackrel Plaza** (1958) and sociologist Peter Berger's **The Noise of Solemn Assemblies** (1961). It is a problem recognized to be affecting Protestants, Catholics, and Jews: Herberg and Heschel (Jewish), Willimon and Hauerwas (Methodist), Leith (Presbyterian), Neuhaus (Lutheran/Roman Catholic), Postman (United Churches of Christ), and countless others have addressed the issue. The secularization of American religion is not limited to a few large churches in urban areas; it is present wherever there are a few TV sets, digital watches, and Bic pens.

Tom Olbricht's comments are insightful and may offer a needed corrective. Clearly secularization has broad roots antecedent to the rise of the Enlightenment (the rise of cities, the development of nominalism, etc.). Perhaps we should have distinguished between secularization and secularism, or at least distinguished between secularization as an intellectual movement and as a cultural phenomenon. I suspect secularization's complexity is probably better understood within a broader cultural context than within a narrowly intellectual one.

Regarding Olbricht's suggestion that the whole problem of secularization can be understood as a problem of idolatry, I have a mixed reaction. On the one hand, he is correct in wanting to set the issue clearly in a theological framework. And he is right in seeing it as involving idolatry. On the other hand, this

should not dismiss the importance of bringing to bear historical, sociological, and psychological insights on the problem. Further, without saying much more theologically, it is not particularly helpful simply to label the problem as that of idolatry -- which I take to be the root of all sin.

Olbricht may be correct in missing an extended biblical theology underlying **The Worldly Church's** critique. I do not, however, think that this invalidated the critique. (And I think there is more biblical theology there than Olbricht allows, although he is probably right regarding our failure to emphasize adequately the positive nature of the Christian life.) Regardless, churchmen like Olbricht need to continue providing a theology that will serve the church struggling with the problems we have identified.

Michael Casey charges that **The Worldly Church** gives an oversimplistic picture of how we got here and that some of its generalizations do not hold. He questions (a) whether the problem is as widespread as we suggest and (b) whether secularization in the church is a development of our own rationalistic tradition.

I think that he is incorrect regarding the degree of secularization but probably more accurate in his second point. Secularization is a very complex process which clearly is engulfing theological traditions very different than our own. I think he is correct in finding sources of our secularization other than in our Enlightenment roots. I would also argue that we turned to the evangelical tradition partly to fill gaps in our own rationalistic tradition, and partly because it would "play" to increasingly sophisticated congregations embarrassed by our sectarian past.

**A**s Christians, however, we should be able to see clearly the unflattering truth about ourselves and our world without recourse to self-deceiving machinations (theological and otherwise).

-Mike Weed

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Further, I also think that he is right in tracing much of our own secularization to the evangelical tradition -- itself permeated with secularizing tendencies. I also suspect that our fascination with pop psychology may partly be traced to roots in evangelical piety. Thus there are three identifiable sources of our secularization: our rationalistic tradition, the evan-

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 gelical tradition, and the modern *Zeitgeist*.

Regarding Michael Casey's practical suggestions -- with which I am largely sympathetic -- I am less than optimistic. Admittedly there are signs of hope; but there are also other signs. For example, the type of training given preachers, the proliferation of various specialized ministries devoid of solid theology, and the lack of responsible catechetical material all suggest things may get worse. Regarding preaching, I fear that our expectations may be too dominated and molded by television personalities to permit an adequate image of the preacher's role and identity.

Shaun Casey's comments are difficult to address succinctly. His view that we wish to restore the Church of Christ to some earlier version is unfounded. We make no claims that things are worse now than earlier -- only that they are different.

Casey contends that our call for a recovery of transcendence fails to recognize that Churches of Christ have suffered from what he terms an overly transcendent view of God bordering on deism. He is right about the quasi-deism but he is wrong to associate it with transcendence. Deism is a limiting of God and denial of transcendence.

He also suggests we use a secularization theory which permits us to ignore the evidence. Yet, he presents no alternative theories. The issue is simply this; all of us know that anything religious people do (e.g., watch dog fights or laugh at clowns) is not automatically a religious activity. Clearly religious institutions may thrive by marketing their wares to meet a wide variety of "needs" (relief from boredom, etc.). Consumer-oriented American religion has escaped the fate of European state-sponsored religion by following this path.

Shaun Casey prefers to see the church's fascination with pop psychology as reflecting the "terrible psychological toll exacted by our theology." This seems parochial. Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Baptist leaders all recognize and struggle with this problem, which is reflective of the self-preoccupation of our therapeutic society.

Casey sees the current "hodge podge" as more reflective of bad theology and a lack of theological method rather than "the recent period of alleged secu-

larism." Rather, he attributes the present situation to a "prudential gospel, excessive focus on self, reverence for power, etc." Here it seems that Casey has simply described secularism's practical face -- however much one attempts to avoid the term.

John Stamps introduces H. Richard Niebuhr's typology and uses it to discuss issues raised by **The Worldly Church**. Niebuhr's typology (which recently has come under criticism) obscures the fact that the "Christ against Culture" type may in fact be a way of serving the culture, i.e., one may separate from culture on behalf of culture. One of the underlying issues is whether we translate the gospel or accommodate it to a particular culture. Presumably, when the gospel is accurately translated and better understood, it remains "folly" and still stands in tension with the current expressions of "the wisdom of the world." At the same time, the gospel is capable of illuminating, exposing, challenging the world, and offering an alternative vision.

By contrast, the way of accommodation reduces the offense of the gospel for the sake of short-lived "relevance" to a particular society or culture. Ironically, this quest for "relevance" invariably results in some form of "theological provincialism" all in the name of being taken seriously by some intellectual or social "province" (e.g., Wall Street, the University, etc.) before whom we seek acceptance and legitimation.

Clearly Stamps is right: there is no responsible theological alternative to being a "sect" in the sense of being an alternative community which in its very existence illuminates the surrounding darkness and challenges of the gods of the age.

In conclusion, I would again like to thank the respondents and to add a personal comment. If I were not a Christian I would be pessimistic about the present situation. As Christians, however, we should be able to see clearly the unflattering truth about ourselves and our world without recourse to self-deceiving machinations (theological and otherwise). Our confidence is not in ourselves and not in the world but in "the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." It is this one in whom we trust and on whom we depend for a rebirth of faith and faithfulness.