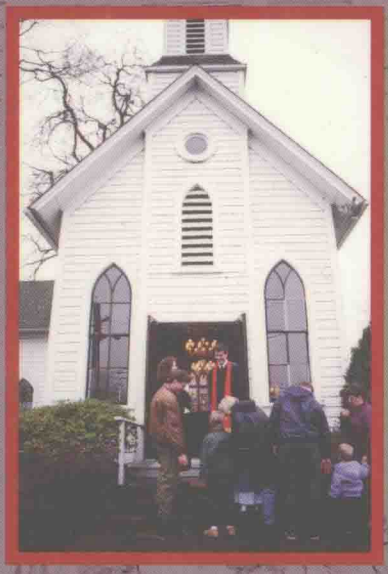
RECLAIMING THE CHURCH

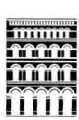


ere the Mainline Church Went Wrong
and What to Do about It

ohn B. Cobb, Jr.

Reclaiming the Church

JOHN B. COBB, JR.



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Preface

I have long lived with one foot in the field of professional theology; the other, in the church. I have become distressed about their growing separation and the results this has had for both. The church has come to identify theology with what professionals do. Since what professionals do has been increasingly determined by the norms of the university rather than by the needs of the church, the church has lost interest in what it understands to be "theology." Too often the result has been that the church has ceased to think about its own life in terms of its faith, a faith that has itself become vague and unconvincing. This is, I believe, the deepest cause of the decline of the oldline denominations.

Continuing decline is not, however, inevitable. We who have participated in, and contributed to, the decline can still make choices. The purpose of diagnosing a disease is to find a remedy. This book undertakes both to diagnose the current sickness of the church and to propose remedies.

If any of my readers should be persuaded of the need for the churches to renew their theological vocation and should seek more specific help in determining how that might happen, I refer them to two other books I have written. *Lay Theology* (Chalice Press) discusses the types of theological activity in which many members of the church could be involved and how churches might encourage and institutionalize it. *Becoming a Thinking Christian* (Abingdon Press) offers detailed suggestions for beginning the process of such reflection individually or, better, in small groups.

Thinking about this book began when I proposed to Westminster John Knox Press the publication of some lectures I had written over a period of years dealing with the present condition of the church. My editor Timothy Staveteig suggested that some of what I had included could be the nucleus of a useful volume. The resulting book

includes ideas and some material from earlier lectures, but these have been reworked, making a more integrated book with much of the material newly written.

The introduction contains ideas first presented in Detroit, Michigan, at the fortieth annual meeting of the Continuing Congregational Churches. Chapter 1 draws on two unpublished lectures, one given at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, and the other at Queens College in Kingston, Ontario. Most of chapter 2 is adapted from a lecture given at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee, and subsequently published in *The Spire* ("Revisioning Ministry for a Revisioned Church," Summer/Fall 1992). Chapter 4 draws extensively from my Ainslie Lecture given in St. Louis, Missouri, and subsequently published in *Mid-Stream* ("The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Humanity," January 1995). In all instances I am grateful to my hosts for their graciousness as well as for stimulus and for encouragement to think that the ideas presented may have some value to others. With respect to the previously published material, I am grateful to *The Spire* and to *Mid-Stream* for permission to use it again in this quite different context.

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Introduction
Spiritual Sickness as Lukewarmness

 This book is written by a troubled member of an oldline denomination. I happen to be a United Methodist, and some of what I say will be based on my experience in that denomination. But the basic problems are present in other denominations as well, and it is to members of a wide range of such denominations that I address myself.

Our churches are sick. Statistical projections indicate that this is a sickness unto death. "Death" should not be taken literally. Great institutions rarely disappear without a trace. But we are moving from a situation in which we were not long ago thought of as "mainline" churches to one of marginality. To survive at the margin there is a danger that we will so change our character that what has been valuable in our churches will disappear. That is the "death" that is to be feared.

Since our decline is apparent to all, there is much discussion of its causes. The analysis of causes suggests prescriptions for stemming or reversing the tide of decay. If, for example, we are told that we are declining because we have become too liberal, then the prescription is to become more conservative. On the other hand, if the diagnosis is that we have been too reluctant to adopt contemporary language and ways of thought, the prescription is to become better connected with the culture. If we are told that we are too centralized, then we suppose that we need to give greater freedom to local congregations. If we decide that we are too intellectual or rational, we try to appeal

more to the emotions. If the problem is that we do not think clearly enough or speak to the minds of people in our congregations, we try to become more scholarly. If our activity on social issues causes our weakness, we tone down these concerns. If it is our irrelevance to the real problems of the world that causes people to leave us, then we become more involved.

No doubt there is a grain of truth in all these accounts. But they remain superficial and of little help. We need to view ourselves more realistically in terms of the history that has formed us. We need also to analyze our present condition in the context of that history. Such analysis may suggest that our movement has had its day in the sun and must now, like so many historical movements, fade into obscurity. Or it may suggest that we are in a cyclical downswing that can be reversed. If so, it may also tell us what has brought about the downswing and how such downswings in the past have been turned around.

A basic assumption underlying the book is that the problem is spiritual or one of esprit. Movements flourish when their members are passionately committed. Christianity has flourished when Christians have been convinced that their faith is of supreme importance to them individually and collectively and also to the world. These convictions call forth deep personal commitment and willingness to sacrifice.

The results of such conviction have been ambiguous. We have become keenly aware, for example, of how often it has led to destructive treatment of those who do not share it, such as the Jews. Some who have suffered at Christian hands now rejoice that so many of us are now halfhearted. In that condition we are far less dangerous to them.

But the point is not that it is good or bad for Christians to have strong convictions. It is that without strong, shared Christian convictions among their members, churches decline. That is what is happening now.

If a community or institution is to be vital *as a church,* the convictions must be Christian. This does not mean that they must be convictions of which I as a Christian approve, or convictions that I as a Christian believe are responsibly derived from the Bible. The conviction may be, for example, that following a particular path ensures health and prosperity. I do not find this to be biblical or traditionally Christian nor a suitable innovation in the tradition. But if those who

hold the conviction believe it to be at the heart of Christian faith, it can lead to vitality. Or again, many churches successfully encourage strong convictions supportive of patriarchy and, at least in principle, dangerous to Jews. I oppose these teachings, but that in no way denies that those who hold them believe them to be Christian and that they enhance the vitality of those churches in which they are widely shared.

The requirement that the strong convictions be shared is an important one and currently particularly difficult for oldline churches to achieve. If some members have strong convictions, but these are about concerns that seem unimportant or misguided to others, they cannot provide a basis for shared worship or action. There is a chance that the minority will be able to persuade a majority that has no strong conviction to accept their views for practical purposes at least, and this can lead to invigoration of a whole congregation. For example, if some are deeply convinced that the gospel calls for the inclusion of all types of people in the church (these days the issue is likely to be about homosexuals), and the majority have no comparably strong conflicting convictions, the congregation may be led to act on this conviction. After the loss of a few families, the congregation may be revitalized by its experience of acting on these partially shared convictions.

In the more common event, other members have contrary convictions. If both groups have a clear common understanding of the mission of the church, and if they can articulate it in such a way that they can understand and appreciate the opponents' views as sincere efforts to implement that mission, then the church can be invigorated by the ensuing debate, and it may remain united around still more fundamental commitments. But today in the oldline churches, this is rare. Occasionally, the congregation may divide. But more often the leadership holds it together out of institutional loyalty while losing most of those who have strong convictions and find that they can act on these better somewhere else. Those who remain are the lukewarm.

In the second and third chapters of the book of Revelation we find seven short letters to the seven churches of Asia. All are critical in some respect. The accusations addressed to some sound very serious. But the harshest rhetoric is reserved for the church of Laodicea, which is not accused of any wrongdoing. Its failure is that it is neither cold nor hot. Because it is lukewarm it will be spewed out of Christ's mouth.

This is bad news for us in the oldline churches today. As a group and on the whole we are lukewarm. We do good things. We serve real needs of real people. But we inspire no passion. We no longer even call for primary commitment to the gospel that we purport to serve. We are quite content if, among the priorities of our members, Christian faith comes in third or fourth, after family and employer and nation perhaps. We accept still lower rankings from many of our members with little complaint, glad for the small favor of occasional attendance and financial contributions.

Clearly a movement that ranks low among the priorities of its members cannot do much beyond the routine. It can, perhaps, allow groups of members who are more serious about their faith to act accordingly. An argument for local church autonomy today is that congregations can then express a seriousness about their faith that is absent in the denomination as a whole. But often it really means only that local churches cease to support what missional activities continue at regional or national levels.

In this condition the church cannot define the needs of the world from a Christian perspective and cannot order its activities to meeting those needs. Since it has few clear purposes beyond survival, its most pressing concern is the attraction of new members. To this end it adopts a marketing strategy. It finds out what people within commuting range want from a church, and it competes with other churches in the neighborhood to provide those services. Instead of condemning consumerism from a Christian perspective, churches accept it and adapt themselves to it. None of this activity is evil in itself, but there is nothing about such a church that calls for a high priority of commitment from its members or witnesses to that which is of ultimate importance. Even when the marketing strategy works for particular congregations, this does little to stem the decline of the oldline churches as a whole or even of the "successful" congregation.

This bleak picture is not descriptive of American Christianity as a whole. In some segments of contemporary American Protestantism the besetting sin is idolatry rather than lukewarmness. Such idolatry may be more dangerous both to members and to outsiders than is lukewarmness, but that is not our concern here. Idolatry is not the current sin of the oldline churches. In still other segments of the church, the problem may be deceptive expectations that cannot be fulfilled and lead to disillusionment and despair. That, too, may do

more harm than lukewarmness. But the problem of the oldline churches is more commonly that expectations are too low; so this is not the problem to consider here. There may be segments of the church that are relatively free from any such serious problems. But their good fortune is only indirectly relevant to the concern here with the oldline churches.

This picture is intended, then, only to describe the oldline churches about which and for which this book is written. We need to look at ourselves realistically and diagnose our failures honestly. We need then to see whether we nevertheless have a continuing role to play that warrants our efforts to survive and even to grow. And if we decide that we do have such a role, then we need to consider what changes are needed if we are to reverse the current decay.

This book consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 asks why we have become lukewarm. It describes how the church recovered from earlier periods of lukewarmness and argues that a similar recovery would be possible today if the church would undertake to think through the issues that face it. Its seeming inability to do so is due, in large part, to the professionalization of theology, its location in the university, and its abandonment by the church.

Chapter 2 describes two proposals for responding to the decline of the church: renewal and transformation. It relates these proposals to the wider cultural situation in which much of what has long been taken for granted is coming to an end, and it shows how they respond to these endings and to the new beginnings that can now be discerned. It points out that the chief obstacle to movement in either of these directions is the inability of the church to think theologically.

Chapter 3 follows with an argument that though both renewal and transformation are needed, transformation is the more inclusive response. It affirms also that it is transformation that is most urgently needed today. It argues specifically for a transformation of our thinking about salvation and how this can renew wholehearted commitment in the church.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to a different aspect of the church's current problem: the division between reformists and conservative traditionalists. A transformationist approach can achieve reconciliation in some, but certainly not all, cases. This transformationist approach also works beyond individual denominations to a new ecumenism that will seek reconciliation among the oldline churches, the post-Fundamentalists, and

the Pentecostals. And finally, in a different way, it seeks reconciliation with other great religious communities.

The discerning reader will have noticed a tension throughout the preceding chapters. On the one hand, they call for the church to renew its theological vocation, leaving open what conclusions fresh reflection may reach. On the other hand, they are full of expressions of my own judgments about the kind of thinking that can save the church from lukewarmness and the accompanying decay. Chapter 5 renews the call for the church to think again, and it stresses that the most basic question on which it needs to think is the reality and nature of God. Much more extensively than elsewhere, however, it suggests, hopefully, where such thinking may lead today. Before embarking on this argument, however, the referent of *oldline churches* as used here should be specified.

First, the term "oldline" is limited here to the churches that were in existence at the beginning of the twentieth century. This distinguishes the oldline churches from the Fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches that have arisen in this century. (Relations to these are discussed in chapter 4.) The term "Protestant" excludes not only Orthodox and Catholics but also groups that have been clearly sectarian or ambivalent about their Christian identity, even if they were fully established at the beginning of the century. The account of oldline Protestant churches in this book has little relevance to Seventh-day Adventists, New Thought movements, Mormons, or Unitarian Universalists.

Second, other restrictions on the applicability of this account are not clearly implied by the designation "oldline Protestant." In fact, this book addresses only those oldline Protestant churches that have been involved ecumenically with one another and with the Orthodox and Catholics. Important denominations such as Southern Baptists and Missouri Synod Lutherans, as well as many other smaller denominations, have had a very different history and are in a very different situation than what is depicted here.

Finally, the churches here addressed—the ones that have become lukewarm—are predominantly white. This is said primarily to acknowledge that the situation within predominantly black churches is different. These churches also have problems, as well as strengths, but they require separate consideration. Also, there are many ethnic groups within the primarily white oldline denominations that have a

quite different spirit from the white majority. The analysis in this book does not apply, for example, to Korean congregations in the Presbyterian and United Methodist denominations.

Since the account of oldline churches is not especially favorable, those omitted should not take offense! Some of the problems of these oldline churches, however, are shared by some of those who have been excluded from the classification presented here; hence members of other churches will not find this book entirely irrelevant. But to generalize even about the churches addressed here is risky. The account of the strengths and weaknesses of other traditions is for their members to provide.

1

Diagnosing the Loss of Shared Convictions

The introduction argued that we are lukewarm because we do not have an understanding of Christian faith as supremely important either for ourselves or for the world. Obviously, this does not mean that no individual member of the oldline churches has such an understanding. I even claim to have one myself!

But no such understanding is widely operative in our collective work as congregations or denominations. There the topic is rarely even discussed. If it is raised, it is quickly silenced because of the danger of controversy. Hence there are no serious convictions available to generate enthusiasm for our churches as a whole. As a result, those who do understand the Christian faith to be of supreme importance experience the church as only one among a variety of contexts within which to express their faith rather than its fundamental bearer. Such private understandings do not change the basic situation of the churches.

There is, therefore, a lack of a shared sense of the primary importance of that to which the church witnesses. As long as this sense is lacking, the church cannot convincingly call for primary commitment or loyalty. It must inevitably settle for third, fourth, fifth, or sixth place in the priority system of most of its members. The temperature can at best be lukewarm. This cannot be changed unless there are powerful movements in which many members come to a shared conviction as to the primary, even ultimate, importance, for themselves and for the world, of the reality the church attests.

Such a shared conviction has been present in the oldline churches in the past. They have not always been lukewarm. Indeed, they would never have played their important role in American history if they had been lukewarm. A survey of our history, viewing it in terms of lukewarmness and passionate conviction, will help to illumine our present condition.

Challenge and Response in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

In the early days of Protestantism in Europe, and in the early days of settlement in this country, lukewarmness was not the problem. The Pilgrims and the Puritans were far from lukewarm. They made great sacrifices for their faith and subordinated all other considerations to it. Roughly through the first half of the seventeenth century, we would be more likely to fault our Protestant forebears for fanaticism or idolatry than for lukewarmness. Nevertheless, in the second half of the seventeenth century and extending into the eighteenth century, lukewarmness became widespread. This remarkably abrupt shift in the role of Christianity in Europe and America requires explanation.

Much of the intense religious feeling in the first half of the seventeenth century focused on particular formulations of the faith. As a result, for half a century there were wars among competing Christian factions. The bloodshed was enormous. Increasingly, Christians viewed the passions that caused this situation as fanatical rather than as expressions of faith and began to look for a common ground among the competing factions. This was found in two places: nationalism and rationalism.

Christians on both sides of the conflicts felt loyalty and commitment to the well-being of their homelands. By shifting basic commitment from divisive religious institutions to political units, they could stop the killing among neighbors. Hence nation states took over primary responsibility from the churches. National governments were to regulate religious life within their boundaries and to prevent the animosities among Christian groups from leading to bloodshed. Each nation should respect the right of other nations to shape their own religious life. Thus nationalism arose in part as a way of controlling religious passions and their expressions.

The seventeenth century was also a time of enormous intellectual

creativity and, especially, of scientific advances. For the first time since antiquity, Western Europeans believed that their reflections advanced upon and superseded those of the classical period. This meant that, in a very fundamental sense, reason replaced external authority as the basis for determining what should be believed, how society should be organized, and how people should act.

When scientists looked to Aristotle as their authority, there was no incongruity in looking to the Bible as religious authority. It would have seemed arrogant to appeal to current experience and reasoning against the wisdom of the ancients. But when scientists found that the ancients were wrong on many points, that through experiment and rational reflection they could come to a more comprehensive truth, the appeal to ancient scriptures became more dubious. Perhaps in religious and ethical matters as well, one should do one's own thinking.

The combination of the rise of nationalism and the emergence of rationalism did not bring an end to Protestantism, but it did bring an end to the social dominance of passionate commitment to Christian faith and the subordination of all else to this. Christianity was widely regarded as containing much wisdom that could be confirmed by reason and was supportive of the national good. Hence most of those committed primarily to nationalism and rationalism did not oppose it—at least in its Protestant form—as long as it performed its proper functions and avoided claiming too much for itself. They wanted Protestant Christianity to be lukewarm, and to a large extent it fulfilled their hopes. Lukewarm Christianity did not criticize nationalism and did not intrude on the primacy of reason.

Many individual Christians and small groups of Christians continued to believe in the primacy of the Christian faith. Some of them largely ignored the concerns of the nation, the cultural changes that had occurred, the claims of reason, and the new worldview of physics. On the other hand, there were those who affirmed the importance of the nation and embraced the claims of reason and the new worldview but integrated all this into an inclusive Christian vision. The latter overcame lukewarmness on a large scale in the Protestant churches.

The two most important influences in the revival of Christian conviction in the American churches were John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards. Both were thinkers as well as evangelists. Indeed, their evangelism expressed the deep confidence they had in the truth of Christianity as inclusive of all truth. Both integrated scriptural au-

thority and reason rather than juxtaposing them. Both undertook to serve their communities, but in neither case would they allow a secular institution to define the good of the community for them. This they defined as Christians.

Together with many others they generated the evangelical movement that transformed the understanding of Christian faith in the English-speaking world. Through the change in the churches, they had a large impact on the whole of society. The faith of which they spoke was deeply personal but at the same time totally social. They did not focus on political action, but the reform of society to which they were both committed required such action among their followers. The antislavery movements in both England and the United States were deeply rooted in evangelicalism.

For millions of evangelicals, wholehearted commitment to Christ was the organizing and unifying principle of life. This did not require a defensive rejection of science or other advances in thought. Christian faith was felt to allow and include all of that. Hence, one did not need to divide one's loyalties between faith and knowledge. Also, to be a Christian was to be a good citizen. One did not have to divide one's loyalties between Christianity and the nation. A good Christian citizen did not give to the nation a loyalty equal to that given to Christ.

Of course, there were features of the evangelical teaching of the eighteenth century that are radically outdated today. The point here is not that they solved the problem of lukewarmness for all time, but that they showed how it could be overcome in a particular historical situation. The attempt to continue just this form of evangelicalism in our changed situation, by ignoring the issues raised in the past two centuries, produces an "evangelicalism" that is not truly good news and lacks the authenticity of the original form.

Challenge and Response in the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth-century challenges to inherited Christian thinking were more varied and drastic than those of the eighteenth century. Three challenges were especially important: the rise of historical consciousness, focusing especially on the quest of the historical Jesus; the appearance of evolutionary thinking, first in biology, but then more inclusively as a general worldview; and the sociological reflection