

Article

Remnant and the New Dark Age

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Abstract: A new dark age has come upon us; as a result, Christianity and its churches in North America are no longer growing. One reason for this might be the widespread impression that Christians are hypocrites, saying they believe one thing while doing the opposite. However, that accusation would only be true if these believers actually believed the principles they are supposed to be violating. It is more likely that many Christians have, like those around them, abandoned truth in favor of personal opinion bringing moral discourse to a near standstill and intensifying the darkness by extinguishing the light of truth. Still, there is hope. In the past, it often was a faithful few, a remnant, who preserved the knowledge of that light and facilitated a new dawn. History shows us that the very movements that are today abdicating responsibility were once spiritual survivors themselves. They withdrew, coalesced around the remaining spark of truth in order to remember, preserve, and reignite. The thoughts and practices of these pioneers could guide the escape from today's darkness.

Keywords: moral discourse; contemporary North American Christianity; remnant



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1. Introduction

This article explores the nature, causes, and possible resolution of the profound intellectual and spiritual darkness that has descended on Christian churches in North America. The term “Churches”¹ in this case refers to the Evangelical and the Orthodox traditions, both of which play a direct role in the author’s experience, both of which are the intended recipients of the study’s conclusions and suggestions. However, today, these terms (Evangelical, Orthodox) are being used with such a wide range of meanings and applied to so many different actors that it has become difficult to know who the actual subjects of analysis are and who the intended readers might be. Therefore, before looking at the darkness itself, some attempt at defining these terms is in order.

The only way to effectively use these terms in the limited context of this essay is for the author to clearly articulate his use of some generally accepted lexical meaning and carefully indicate when there are deviations from that standard. Moreover, the author is asking the readers, no matter their own opinions, to understand and accept that the meanings derived from those standards are the meanings ascribed to these terms as they are used in this text. Absent such agreement, no reasonable dialog can take place since the readers would be free to read other meanings into the text leaving the author’s statements open to misinterpretation and, perhaps, rendering them completely incomprehensible. In a very general way, what is being asked for here is similar to adherence to a correspondence theory of truth, according to which a statement, or in this case a term, has to possess direct correlation to some real state of affairs (it is either raining or it is not) or, in the case of a word, conformity to some generally accepted lexical standard such as a dictionary (the musical note A has a frequency of 440 Hz²; in an ordinary dialog, this, not something determined by individual opinion, is the meaning of the note A).

As defined here, the term “Eastern Orthodox” is relatively straightforward and stable. It has usually defined in terms of commitment to the affirmations of the Creeds and the doctrinal affirmations of the early Church the authority of the Scriptures and, to a lesser extent, certain rites and practices. To be Orthodox is to ascribe to and participate in the

dynamic flow of history that includes the initial deposit of Christ as it passes over into the reality of human life, first to the Apostles, then through them from generation to generation. This allows for relatively stable lexical content and an identity that is clearly rooted in doctrine, specific practices, commandments and moral precepts, and structures (hierarchy, Ecumenical Patriarch). In that sense, who can rightly call themselves Orthodox? Only someone who was baptized in the Orthodox Church according to its canons, affirms the Creed, and participates in the sacramental life of the Church³.

Defining the term “Evangelical” is a bit more challenging since the lexical content seems to be a bit more fluid. During my youth (ca. 1950–1975), I was an active member of a group that, in no uncertain terms, understood itself to be Evangelical. That identity was in large part rooted in its Scandinavian Free Church heritage as well as Continental European (German) pietism that preceded it. This legacy was an active and vital part of my fellow Evangelicals’ self-awareness and did, in fact, help create a sense of Evangelical identity and belonging⁴. However, that identity was also shaped by a shared commitment to a very specific set of doctrines, doctrines that had been articulated, fought for, and died for, and that within very specific and definable historical contexts. Growing up, it seemed impossible to separate what we believed from the people, events, and circumstances that brought us to those convictions. I was clearly a descendant of Scandinavian Free Church pietists who tenaciously ascribed to a very clearly defined set of beliefs, in particular, to an unwavering commitment to the authority of the Scriptures.

However, the way that identity was defined began to change in the late 1970s as the ethno-/historical commitments and ties began to fade. By the time I was teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the 1980s, identifying myself as an Evangelical in those circles had almost nothing to do with my historical (Scandinavian) heritage and more to do with what I believed about biblical authority, the necessity of witness, the importance of keeping Christ’s commandments. In other words, as consciousness of a shared history diminished and disappeared, Evangelical identity increasingly became a matter of a shared theology. The common history was, of course, not erased from memory, but it was no longer a primary factor in the self-understanding of (these particular) Evangelical believers.

That should have given us a clear and stable standard for defining ourselves. Believe these things and you are an Evangelical. Unfortunately, that transition from an identity rooted in common ecclesio-theological history to one generated almost exclusively by our doctrinal commitments did not go as smoothly as expected because the assumed theological consensus and the unity of behavior that might have been expected never materialized. As a result, it became increasingly difficult to say exactly what it meant to be an Evangelical. By the mid-1980s, theological diversity became so pronounced within the Evangelical community that, according to Carl F. H. Henry, the “‘evangelicals’ sense of their own identity and purpose, as well as their public image, [had] never been more murky and maligned” (*Affirmations: What Does It Mean to Be Evangelical?* 1989, p. 16). So concerned were Henry and other “Christian leaders [that they] convened at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, to try to hammer out a concise definition of evangelical belief and practice” (*Affirmations: What Does It Mean to Be Evangelical?* 1989). The conference participants produced an 1800-word statement detailing nine theological positions to which all Evangelicals would agree. The document concluded with a three-fold definition according to which an Evangelical believes, first of all, the gospel as it is set forth in the Bible; second, holds to all of the most basic doctrines that emerge from the Bible and are summarized in the Apostles’ Creed and the historic confessions of evangelical churches; and third, believes the Bible to be the final and authoritative source of all doctrine (Kantzer and Henry 1990, p. 5). Therefore, it was this commitment to that specific set of values that was to define these individuals as Evangelical and not the many different historical streams, institutions, and denominations that they represented (Labberton 2018, p. 16).

It seems then that we do have a generally accepted lexical content that allows us to define the terms “Evangelical” (affirmations) and “Orthodox” (Creed, Tradition). Indeed,

these standards are still widely used. For example, as recently as in 2017, the LifeWay Research Evangelical Beliefs project was able to categorize respondents to their surveys as Evangelical if they agreed with four statements: (1) the Bible is the highest authority for what I believe; (2) it is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior; (3) Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin; (4) only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation (see [Smietana 2017](#)). These agreed-upon definitions have enabled us to use the terms with a high degree of mutual understanding in an ordinary dialog, that is, until recently when two things have conspired to change the situation.

First, within both of these faith traditions (Evangelical, Orthodox), there is now an increasing number of individuals, publications, and institutions that have begun to modify or alter the standards used to define these communities. These redefinitions range from altering or abandoning specific positions (on homosexuality), reinterpreting particular passages of Scripture (on materialism, divorce, etc.), all the while still claiming a commitment to its authority, taking a revisionist view of their own historical legacy, and, in a few cases, abandoning the defining framework (history and doctrine) altogether. While changes of this nature can be expected as the general drift of society puts pressure on the Christian community, what makes this challenging now is that one and the very same term (Orthodox, Evangelical) continues to be used even in the absence of any correspondence to an agreed upon standard. Of course, there are some who are honest enough to drop the label and leave those communities when they are no longer able to ascribe to the established definitions. David Gushee, for example, writes that there is now a "surging population of evangelical exiles," ([Gushee 2020](#), p. 9) "post-evangelicals or ex-evangelicals or #exvangelicals or somewhere painfully in between. I am one of them" ([Gushee 2020](#), p. 1). Given the number of young people leaving the Orthodox Church ([Danckaert 2014](#)), the same thing could be said about them.

Nevertheless, there are many others who still self-identify as Orthodox or as Evangelical, and that with a much-diminished adherence to the historical legacies or theological affirmations that once characterized these groups. This can be seen in recent polling which shows that many who still call themselves Evangelical now embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the general population. Divorce is more common among "born-again" Christians than in the general American population. Only six percent of the Evangelicals tithe. Forty-seven percent of the self-identifying Orthodox think that aiding the poor "does more harm than good" ([Orthodox Christians—Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics 2020](#)). White Evangelicals are the "most likely people to object to neighbors of another race, and the sexual promiscuity of evangelical youth is only a little less outrageous than that of their non-evangelical peers" ([Sider 2005](#), p. 12). The same kind of lexical discontinuity can be seen among the Orthodox. Sixty two percent of the Orthodox think that homosexuality "should be accepted" ([Orthodox Christians—Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics 2020](#)). They express this opinion and identify as Orthodox, all the while being members of a Church that has consistently considered the practice incompatible with Scripture.

Presumably, this is happening because these individuals assume it is their right to reinterpret, modify, replace, or even annul those standards. They might have come to believe that they, individually, "know or feel" what a particular passage of Scripture might mean and how it should be applied to any given situation. What if they thought that they themselves and not the Church, Tradition, or Scripture had absolute sovereignty over the moral decisions they make and the behavior they engage in? There does seem to be some evidence of this kind of thing happening. How often are phrases like "to me, this bible text means . . .", "I feel that this is . . .", or "let me tell you my truth" heard today! If this is indeed happening, then it is the individual who is determining what truth is, and the repository of actual truths contained in the Scripture, Tradition, and

the very words of Christ is being replaced by the individual's own words. Presumably, this would create complete agreement between the behavior and the desires, opinions, feelings, interpretations with which they have replaced Christ's teachings. In that case, they would not be following, or even claiming to follow, Christ's word, but rather their own. That would explain why these individuals would "not feel any sense of internal conflict when it comes to Jesus and their own behavior." They are, after all, doing exactly what they want to do or feel they need to do. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, after a lengthy study of what she calls conservative Christians⁵ (Du Mez 2020), observed no internal conflict, "no angst or no sense that [their behavior] was somehow a difficult trade-off" (Illing 2020). Speaking of these conservative believers, Kobes Du Mez notes, for example, that they "... are not acting against their deeply held values when they elect [corrupt politicians], they're affirming [their own feelings]" (Illing 2020), which means that they are free to continue self-identifying as, in this case, Evangelical. Obviously, this discrepancy between the standard definitions (affirmations, Creed, Traditions) and the beliefs and behaviors of these self-declared Orthodox and Evangelicals makes consistent and understandable use of these terms increasingly difficult if not impossible.

The second factor that has changed the situation comes from outside these faith communities. Here, I am speaking about the way in which these terms (Orthodox, Evangelical) are being used in public discourse or common parlance. This usage is largely driven by the mass media—major news outlets, social media, print media—and it appears to be based on widely available lexical content and the resulting expectations. To get an idea of what these expectations might be, you simply have to look the terms up in a contemporary dictionary⁶. Somehow, because of their own study (dictionaries, literature, documentaries, etc.) or because of the claims and behavior of the believers themselves, these observers develop a mental image of Evangelicals and the Orthodox that at least initially approximate the lexical standards mentioned above. They then use that internal template to filter and inform their observations and, in some cases, condemnation of both Evangelical and Orthodox believers. This can be illustrated by the secular contractor who, after witnessing obvious misbehavior by Orthodox monastics, spontaneously said, "they are not acting like Christians." The contractor's understanding of Christianity may not be accurate, but he does have a preconceived mental image, an expectation, and he is using it. Similarly, reporters observe self-proclaimed Evangelicals aligning themselves with political positions and activities and proceed to evaluate them according to their own expectations of things Evangelical. They wonder how the Evangelicals' unrestrained embrace⁷ of right-wing political candidates, issues, and conspiracies⁸ can be squared with their perceived claim to follow Christ. How can they "bestow a lopsided 75% to 80% majority of their political support upon ... a man constantly demonstrating his total lack of human decency through his cruel social policies, sleazy personal behavior, ceaseless torrent of lies and vicious, hate-filled slurs spewed at anyone who refuses to bow down before him" (McNally 2019). Other observers wonder in what sense these individuals can be seen as keeping Christ's commandments when the members of a packed Evangelical megachurch respond to a politician's announcement that one of our enemies had been "terminated" with "roaring applause ... " holding hands, praying, singing songs praising God while they "chant 'USA' and 'four more years....'" (Payne 2020). To many observers, the discrepancy between Jesus' teaching on non-violence and these self-identified followers of Christ is simply astounding and hence the charge of hypocrisy. "To celebrate an assassination in a church is not only a distortion of the Christian message [as imagined by the reporters], but it is also a gross example of moral hypocrisy and massive self-deception" (Payne 2020).

However, as these reports proliferate, the terms (in particular, Evangelical) are gradually changed, reshaped in the image of the reporters' observations, expectations, and disappointments to the point where, as those words are now being used publicly in the United States, they no longer correspond to the abovementioned set of theological affirmations and are almost always used negatively. "Christians have [it seems] developed a reputation for saying one thing and doing another" (Bradley 2016). Associating them with

hypocrisy⁹ has become a default position of sorts such that “Many folks don’t perceive Christian individuals, churches, institutions, and organizations in the United States as being loving, patient, or kind—and with good reason. Instead, Christians are often viewed as being the exact opposite: envious, boastful, arrogant, and rude” (Matton 2019).

At the same time, even as the meanings are evolving, these terms (Evangelical, Orthodox) are still being used in public discourse as if we all agreed on what they mean. However, when speaking of Evangelical and Orthodox Christians, are we referring to individuals defined by the ancient creeds, Scripture, shared doctrinal affirmations, or a common historical legacy? Are they simply ritualists mindlessly performing certain rites, preserving a particular language or culture, doing church, all the while being divorced from the theology and Tradition that once defined them? Are they, on the other hand, fanatics, right-wing, seditionists (6 January 2021) referred to by the national media as Evangelicals (and, indeed, there were plenty of bibles, crosses, pastors present that day for the whole nation to see, bolstering identification)? When claiming that some Orthodox and Evangelicals no longer believe in or reflect the basic principles of the faith (as is indeed evidenced by recent polling), are we referring to the same individuals defined in the media as Evangelicals? As many Orthodox become nominal, are characterized by an appalling lack of biblical knowledge, and are gradually shifting allegiances and commitments, are we still to call them Orthodox? Obviously, this muddled state of lexical content, this definitional uncertainty makes writing an essay like this or for that matter just discussing the religious landscape quite challenging. At the same time, one has to wonder why this is happening and whether these shifting definitions and allegiances are indicative of, the result of, or even an expression of the Darkness now descending on us.

2. The Descending Darkness

This societal darkness into which North American Christianity is being absorbed is the result of the disproportionate influence of extreme inwardness (Taylor 1989, p. 211) fostered by radical individualism which assumes the human ability to define the good by referencing only itself. This turn inward has effectively prevented individuals from appealing to any kind of meta-narrative when seeking to legitimize the rightness of their own beliefs and everyday behavior. All “moral judgments, as they [have] now come to be understood, [are] *essentially contestable*, expressive of the attitudes and feelings of those who uttered them” (MacIntyre 2007, Loc. 57). For that reason, moral discourse has become impossible as “our society [now] has no established way of deciding between these claims” (MacIntyre 2007, p. 7). In the absence of external, impersonal standards, there are no facts, no arguments, just personal opinions. We have moved beyond the relevancy of any objective truth into what the Oxford Dictionary describes as the realm of post-truth, an intellectual space “in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Languages 2016). It is not that the concept of truth has been entirely lost. It is just that truth has little bearing or no bearing on the conclusions drawn and behaviors rooted in those conclusions. Recently, a well-known public figure made a statement that was obviously false; a reporter asked one of this person’s colleagues, “Can you provide any evidence to back up that statement?” In answer, the colleague said, “Well, look, I think he’s expressed his opinion on that. And he’s entitled to express his opinion on that.” To which the startled reporter asked, “... whether it’s true or not?” (Wang 2016).

If everything, including what is true, rests on individual opinion, then “moral argument appears to be necessarily *interminable*” (MacIntyre 2007, p. 8). Discourse is reduced to my word against yours, my opinion against yours, my truth against your truth, in a perpetual exchange that can never be resolved into rationally justifiable action. We could, of course, as many do, simply disengage and withdraw into the isolation of our respective opinion bubbles, thus avoiding exposure to anything not already agreed with (Sunstein 2017). In that case, there is little need for expertise, general knowledge, education, literacy, or history since everything that is needed is found within the sphere of

one's own personal opinion. No longer valued, literacy, education (Berman 2000), and civility (Brooks 2015) will gradually fade from collective consciousness while intentional ignorance, arrogance, and superstition will rapidly intensify (Hunt 2001). Even if one chooses to engage, they will inevitably be trapped in an endless debate-sans-truth which, bereft of coherent counterpoint, will resort to attacks ad hominem, become increasingly violent, and will end in an angry, morally divided gridlock—collective moral paralysis without remedy. As our “civilization tips over into decline, the contents of its educational and cultural institutions, its arts, literature, sciences, philosophies, and religions . . .” (Greer 2016, p. 10) are being irrevocably forgotten. Even conservative Christians are themselves being irresistibly dragged down into the dark abyss where the light of faith, biblical literacy, decent discourse, self-transcendence, and kenotic love are being actively and knowingly disremembered.

Christianity in North America is caught up in the process of losing its moral treasures to a self-induced mass amnesia—forgetting decorum, neglecting biblical teaching, disregarding Tradition. As literacy, education, civility, and basic knowledge fade, the basic resources needed to proceed with new moral enquiries or to recover from the damage already sustained are also being lost. We are, as Jane Jacobs has warned, “rushing headlong into a Dark Age” (Jacobs 2007, Loc. 61). There are, of course, many today who shy away from the designation “Dark Ages” because it is said to be a misleading generalization that all too often implies “a time of death, ignorance, stasis, and low quality of life” (Reinhardt 2013, p. 1). Nevertheless, since “our society’s analytical elements are in jeopardy” (Hunt 2001, p. 8), as was the case in Western Europe after the fall of Rome, “we cannot ignore the parallels between the Dark Ages and our own time” (Hunt 2001, p. 8).

If the darkness descending generally on our society were not upsetting enough, the failings of Christians have only deepened the distress. By replacing the divine repository of precepts with the vicissitudes and vagaries of individual choice, these believers have all but eliminated the possibility of reliable moral discrimination both in churches and by Christians. If believers who lay claim to the light of Christ’s standard for making moral decisions are in reality governed only by the dimness of their own imaginings, then with what insight can they possibly illumine the moral darkness of a declining society? If the light born by the very children of light (Eph. 5:8) is extinguished by moral bankruptcy, then what hope is left? With no moral *résistance* whatsoever, these could-be-luminaries are instead willingly absorbed into the morally self-defining mass of lemmings rushing over the proverbial cliff to join the pervading blackness of an abyss. Is this not being condemned to the state of affairs described by Isaiah? “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (5:20). Does this not mean facing the ultimate darkness spoken of by Jesus when He said the “light of the body [society] is the eye [believers],” but if the eye turns evil, “the whole body shall be full of darkness?” Therefore, if the light turns to darkness, then “how great is that darkness!” (Mt 6:21–23).

Our hearts are heavy, broken by what appears to be a wholesale loss of the values, knowledge, and practices that once defined diverse and vibrant groups and movements of Christians. We are afraid and justifiably speak of the darkness even of those believers who are now harshly judged and effectively silenced by their own collusion with prevailing moral dissolution. We quite naturally ask, “Who can help us find a way forward?” Can one expect to find any hope in such darkness, among the spiritually dead?

3. A New Remnant

Looking back over history, one discovers remarkable echoes of hope-in-darkness that often followed a similar path of recovery, a roadmap to reillumination: regrouping, remembering, reigniting. During times of danger and darkness, believers faithful to Christ have repeatedly responded to descending darkness by coalescing into small groups in order to preserve and nurture the remaining spark of light, faint though it may have been. Across many places, times, and institutions, the remaining faithful have explored various forms of

remnant-living—residual communities and individuals who withdrew without leaving, who lived apart but not in isolation, who were separated and yet remained integrated.

The desert ascetics gave the early believers hope by choosing the “death” of withdrawing from ordinary life as effective means of preserving spiritual life in the face of the darkness of an era plagued by political, financial, and military upheaval as well as the already atrophying institutional Church (Chitty 1995). New ways of preserving that hope evolved and gave rise to a myriad of cenobitic (brick and mortar) communities which spread to Central Europe and which, at least in some cases, represented a deliberate response to the crisis of the Medieval Dark Ages (Berman 2000). That very same spirit of renunciation was expressed differently in the extremely mobile monastic communities that leap-frogged their way across the vast landscape of Eastern Russia and on to the shores of Alaska, proclaiming the Gospel and defending those oppressed by the evils of unbridled greed and materialism (Oleksa 2010). This same ascetic impulse has been repeatedly expressed in the post-Reformation Protestant West. In response to a crisis of a spiritually dead Lutheran orthodoxy (beginning at the end of the 16th century) and the spiritual, physical, and material exhaustion caused by 30 years of religious warfare (1618 to 1648), small but determined groups of believers “withdrew” and formed the very loosely defined Pietist Movement, some of which even lived in semi-monastic assemblies (Ackva et al. 1995).

Those sentiments were given more concrete form in response to the crisis of faith caused by the developing Enlightenment as can be seen in the communal, monastery-like living arrangements established by the Moravians and the influence they had on early Methodism in England. More recent examples include the *Marburger Bruderschaft* (Zimmermann 2011) as well as the *Gemeinschafts Bewegung* which was a movement of Lutheran believers who sought an intensity of spiritual life that could not be found in the increasingly secular Lutheran Church. They were given permission by the Church to establish their own institutions (places of worship (prayer houses), mission agencies, publishing houses, semi-monastic organizations called *Bruder- or Schwesternschaften* and even one dedicated to missionary outreach, the *Liebenzeller Mission*) (Staunen über mehr als 120 Jahre 2020). Similar movements developed in Scandinavia. Under the leadership of Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771–1824) (Hauge 1804), believers responded to the spiritual lifelessness of the state Church by renouncing without abandoning it and withdrawing into specialized communities called *Bedehuset* (prayer houses). In the late 1800s, another Scandinavian movement led by Frederik Franson (Torjesen 1991) had a direct hand in establishing and populating both the Evangelical Free Church of America (Olson 1964) and the Covenant Church of America. Still, another example can be seen in the withdrawal of the “Confessing Christians” (Stoevesandt 1961; Hornig 1977) during the crises of the world wars. These were Lutherans desiring to stand against those in the Church who were collaborating with the Nazis and corrupting Christian teaching and practice. They “withdrew” as a protesting remnant into isolated retreat centers in order to focus on the spiritual life under the leadership of the movement’s most famous representative, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This interest in light-preserving ascetic retreat continues into our own day among Baptist communities in Australia (Dekar 2008), the Lutheran Evangelical Sisters of Mary (Evangelische Marienschwesternschaft 2020) led by Basilea Schlink, the Catholic Society of St. Pius X (Green 2020), and is evidenced in a number of recent publications (Dreher 2017).

Groups and individuals like those mentioned above sought to express the fundamental principle of a strategic retreat and have, without a doubt, played a role in the historical development of Orthodoxy, Protestantism, and what is called, or at least until recently has been understood to be, Evangelicalism. In what are potentially instructive ways, individuals in these streams of history have explored or experimented with their own expressions of this ideal and have developed insights and practices that have enabled them to recognize and preserve the spark of divine light even in the darkness of their own times. We ourselves are living in a time of darkness; a time of political, economic, social chaos; a time in which many in the Church have enabled, identified, or been coopted by that chaos;

a time of pandemic ravages and the less than helpful reactions to it. Therefore, one wonders, as did [MacIntyre \(2007\)](#), [Berman \(2006\)](#), [Dreher \(2017\)](#), [Gushee \(2020\)](#), [Labberton \(2018\)](#), and a host of others, if one can look to the past for insights that could help shape a response to the contemporary crisis. Are there treasures buried in our Orthodox, Protestant, and Evangelical traditions that, if unearthed now, could help illuminate a way out of the present darkness? What would it look like for us, relying on their examples, to implement an expression of basic ascetic principles today, to seek out and latch on to the spark of divine light still present in the darkness, to regroup as remnants around that light, to remember our biblical and traditional treasures, and to initiate a new twilight, a new dawn?

Seeking the light. To begin with, the history of the groups mentioned above teaches us that the flower of hope, that fruit of divinity, should be sought within the context of existing faith communities¹⁰. In other words, they teach us that a strategic withdrawal, a movement of resistance, does not necessarily mean further fracturing the Church by creating yet another separate ecclesial entity. No, the lesson, entirely appropriate for our own situation, seems to be that the task of a remnant is not to start something entirely new, but rather to preserve what has already been given. The continual presence of the light, Christ, is facilitated by the Holy Spirit and passed into the assembly of believers at Pentecost. That is where it is to be found. That is where one is to look for it. That is where the survivors mentioned above sought it, within the Church and the churches as they actually exist. However, if hope is to be rediscovered, it will mean penetrating the moral darkness generated at the interface of Christianity's interaction with the secular world. To find light, those seeking it will have to ignore the evil undergrowth of unethical alliances, see past the structures of alternate truth, overlook the presence of self-centered devotion to wealth, and draw courage, knowing that, as instantiated in this world, the Church is a combination of becoming and being, of potential and actual, constantly caught up in the process of change. Thus, understanding that the true properties of Church are generated by its own essence (the person of Christ) and in spite of the sinful limitations of those who interact with it, one may still be able to get a glimpse of, reach out, and touch the flower of light, its primary properties generated at the interface between the transcendent holy personhood of Christ and our own created personhood.

Searching for hope in this place and in this way immediately draws one's attention to the radiance of the Eucharist, that divinely actuated mediation of and communion with the person of Christ. Therein lies hope—there is the living vine, the flower of hope (the Rose of Sharon, Song of Songs 2:1). However, it is not just the vision of this light, but rather direct contact with the light that allows Christ, who is present in it, to illumine individual experience of the darkness and heal wounds. Therefore, even if all other avenues of personal engagement in the Church may fail to generate hope and seem to simply re-enforce non-Church darkness, one possibility still exists, and in aid of accessing that transcendent hope, this quest must be focused on the holy mysteries as offered during Divine Services by disregarding the many darkness-generating characteristics of ecclesial communities and seeking unmediated participation in the primary transformative power of becoming as it is offered in the Eucharist and applied by Church.

One might counter by saying that the celebration of the liturgy is subject to all the same corrupting influences that have otherwise masked the Church's holiness. Indeed, one might be tempted to think that the sacrament itself is exposed to a hope-limiting degree of vulnerability because it has to be overseen by priests who may or may not be worthy of the sacred task. However, clearly, the efficacy of the sacrament does not depend on the piety or words of the priest but rather on the descent and the operation of the Holy Spirit. True communion is possible even if the celebrant does not embody the essential properties of the Church because the sacrament is accomplished exclusively by God and its efficacy is guaranteed by Him. The act of receiving the holy mysteries may well create the only space in the Church, the only moment in life in which the individual participating in the very life and presence of Christ is actually beyond the reach of evil; it cannot be corrupted.

It is a truly safe haven. It is the best, if not the only, operative point of departure for the individual journey toward restoring hope.

This is, no doubt, one reason why the Eucharist was the unbreakable link to the light even for those who, in the past, had withdrawn into the isolation of the “deserts” (Hall 2006). John the Hermit “took food only on Sunday. For on that day a priest came and offered the Holy Sacrifice for him, and the Sacrament was his only food” (Hall 2006). No matter how much he wandered in the desert, “... on Sundays he was always at the same place to receive Communion” (Cain 2016, VIII. 51). Abba Helle came down out of the desert and crossed the Nile in order to receive communion at a village church (Cain 2016, XIII.59). Abba Apollo taught that “he who receives communion frequently, receives the Savior frequently... [i]t is therefore useful for monks to keep the remembrance of the Savior’s passion in their minds constantly, and to be ready every day, and to prepare themselves in such a way as to be worthy to receive the heavenly Mysteries at any time... ” (Cain 2016, VIII. 56). Another example is Saint Mary of Egypt who received communion from Zozimas (The Life of our Holy Mother Mary of Egypt 2005). The evangelical “separatists” of the Fellowship Movement, the Confessing Church, and the Prayer House movement, even though they withdrew in the face of ecclesial decline, all insisted on maintaining their formal connection to the Church so that they could continue to receive communion.

4. Gathering the Remnant

Having recognized the flower of divine light, these spiritual survivors of the darkness reach to partake and are strengthened. Doing so is an intentional expression of faithfulness, of the spiritual life that still pulses in their hearts. Moreover, it is an observable sign of spiritual commitment that is recognizably and quantitatively unlike the occasional and perfunctory behavior exhibited by many others in the darkness. That contrast combined with the working of the Holy Spirit will allow these spiritual survivors to recognize fellow survivors, sensing a communion that goes beyond the general unity of action inherent in participation (Rom. 12.5, I Cor. 10.17, 12.13). This is a unity of mind (Rom. 12.16, 15, 15 Phil. 2.15), a fellowship, a having-in-common, which creates a perceptible bond between those who genuinely follow Christ (Eph 3.9 1 John 1.7). This is certainly in keeping with the teaching of Romans 8:16 where St. Paul indicates that it is the Spirit Himself who reveals what is shared with one another.

This phenomenon was observed, for example, by a Norwegian State Church Lutheran priest who noticed that when communion was offered, only a very small number of attendees participated. In talking with his congregants, he discovered that they considered such regular participation to be an overt sign of spiritual commitment that went beyond what was considered normal for members of the church (Standal 1987, pp. 66–68). Therefore, if the secularized unfaithful members were able to discern, at least to some extent, the presence of spiritual life in the faithful, then these survivors were presumably even more likely to have recognized the kindred spirit of their fellow survivors. According to Archimandrite Mitilinaios, there has always been and is today a faithful minority, a remnant in the Church, and they will know each other and will have a clear inner understanding that they belong to the remnant (Mitilinaios 2016). In other words, the survivors taking communion have always and will always be able to recognize each other.

This recognition, of course, does not by itself always lead to an actual coalescing of a remnant into an identifiable group. A remnant will not form solely on the basis of some mystical magnetism shared by its potential participants. As history teaches, the remnant is constituted by means of some human agency, that is, by divinely inspired believers willing to issue a call to repentance, courageously speak the truth, teach, write, and even organize. Consider Elijah complaining to God that he alone had remained faithful. Apparently, he was not aware of the seven thousand faithful that God still had in the land, and it took some additional action in order to activate the remnant (1 Kings 19, pp. 15–21). In this case, the fashioning of a remnant was a direct result of God calling Elijah and equipping

him to challenge his contemporaries in light of the promise of the Messiah (Is. 6, 8:16ff). It should also be noted that the remnant existed by an act of God which displayed the justice of His judgment (8:6; 14:21ff). Its coalescing and survival were the result of divine grace (Mic. 2:12; 4:7; 5:6–7). Today, it will be necessary to, in the traditions of the prophets, find ways to enable God-inspired individuals to formally agitate for the coming-together of the survivors into a functioning remnant.

Here, again, one is able to draw on a rich treasury of past practices to guide us as new groups of survivors are organized, societies within the churches for the purpose of remembering, preserving, and promoting spiritual life. The most common approach has been to gather the survivors by offering them the safe harbor of study groups, fellowships, or societies dedicated to the advancement of the spiritual life, as illustrated by the already alluded to in-church groupings formed by Evangelical believers in Germany and Scandinavia. Once established, these groups drew many like-minded who had already been made one by virtue of the Eucharist into the fellowship of shared study, prayer, and witness. Another example is the contemporary adaptation of the Wesleyan class meeting (Mitolinaios 2016). “Historically, Class Meetings ‘made sure that every Methodist was connected to other Methodists, so no one was left out, ignored, or overlooked . . . They relentlessly focused every Methodist on the current state of their relationship with God. And they connected people to others who were at different stages of the Christian life’” (Iovino 2015). Today, these groups are started by “simply invit[ing] some friends together and ask[ing] the question, ‘How’s your spiritual life?’ Then see where the Holy Spirit leads.” It is, it seems to me, a gathering of the like-minded, the spiritual survivors coalescing around the light of Christ’s presence, under the guidance of God-inspired leaders within the existing structures of a Methodist congregation.

The Orthodox world has had its share of dark times, such as the Turkish occupation, and has thus produced its own examples of remnant response. In the difficult 400 years of Ottoman rule, “the Church became a spiritual refuge, the one stable social institution, the cohesive web of Hellenism” (Chrysopoulos 2020). At a time when entire villages were abandoning Christianity, monks like St. Cosmas of Aetolia (1714–1779) gathered some of the faithful into secret schools (το κρυφό σχολειό) to teach the Greek language, preserve their Greek heritage, and keep the people on the path of Orthodoxy (Chrysopoulos 2020). Today, the Orthodox Church has a number of in-Church societies dedicated to specific activities and needs. For example, the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) are dedicated to providing “emergency relief and development programs to those in need worldwide, without discrimination, and strengthen the capacity of the Orthodox Church to so respond. IOCC helps to expand the capacity of the Orthodox Church globally to more effectively minister to people in need” (IOCC 25 Years 2020). Together, the Orthodox Church in America and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America list close to one hundred organizations dedicated to good and noble causes from education to charity, from theology to fundraising. Oddly, there are no societies dedicated specifically to the promotion of the rich spiritual heritage of the Eastern Church or the spiritual life of its members. Perhaps, the majority of the Orthodox are not aware of the severity of the darkness, but the present situation is no less dire than the one faced during the Ottoman occupation and requires no less of a St. Cosmas-like remnant response. We are losing the very things that define the Church. Therefore, given the precedence set by the many other Orthodox societies and the many examples given by saints and martyrs, it seems reasonable to respond to the present darkness by establishing another “society,” one in which Orthodox survivors could, like their Methodist counterparts, gather to ask “How is it with your soul?” and provide instruction and support on the spiritual life. If members can set themselves apart in order to provide food to the hungry, then why not facilitate and preserve spiritual life and teaching?

5. Remembering

Perhaps, one could call it the Society of Light and say that it is dedicated to supporting those who have, in spite of the present darkness, caught a glimpse of the light through the Eucharist. Its basic activity would be remembering. Consider the remnant of Israel forcibly taken off into Babylonian captivity. Separated from Jerusalem and the temple, they were literally unable to bring sacrifice, to worship, and “by the rivers of Babylon, [they] sat down, yea, we wept when [they] remembered Zion” (Ps 137.1). What is remarkable here is that they are said to have acknowledged their loss, faced up to their grief, and found ways of processing it. They tried to nurture the remembrance of Jerusalem. The word used here in the LXX is *μυνησκειν* (Kittel et al. 1985). This concept is central to the biblical view of God remembering certain persons and turning to them in grace and mercy (Gn. 8:1; 19:29; 30:22; Ex. 32:13; 1 S. 1:11, 19; 25:31). However, another basic aspect of this term is that the followers of God remember His past acts, His commandments (Nu. 15:39–40; Dt. 8:2, 18). In fact, a whole theology of remembering is developed (Dt. 5:15; 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7; 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:18, 20, 22; 32:7) around the idea of remembering past struggles (Dt. 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 20, 22) as a means of leading to new obedience and trust. The commands of Christ display power in that they are alive in the disciples through recollection (*ἀνάμνησις*) (Mk. 14:72; Mt. 26:75; Lk. 22:61) (Kittel et al. 1985). This, then, is an active calling to mind of the past. It is not merely remembering or historicizing, but rather, in accordance with the active sense of *ἀνάμνησις*, a making present of the Lord through His words and in the Eucharist. All recollection serves to maintain the purity of faith by “reliving of vanished impressions by a definite act of will” (Kittel et al. 1985).

This, then, is what our new society, our gathering of spiritual survivors will be doing—remembering. Making real and present again—remembering things that have been lost or are being lost to the darkness—the light of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, the practical knowledge of the Bible and Tradition, the ascetic exercise of the spiritual life (fasting, overcoming the passions, guarding the heart, pure prayer of the heart), and the ability to effectively bear witness. These small groups of survivors will withdraw in order to study the Scriptures, revive and engage in the ancient practices of prayer, fasting, and overcoming the passions. They will seek to rediscover the hesychast disciplines of meditation and the use of the Jesus Prayer. Moreover, they will reengage their own tradition of art and music by remembering the lost art of chanting, singing, and iconography. Of course, doing this as a group will also require relearning the practice of dialog, transcending ourselves, abandoning personal “truths” in favor of Scripture and Tradition. The small remnant of survivors will be tasked with preserving by remembrance and actual practice everything that has been lost to the contemporary compromise.

6. Reigniting a New Dawn

As these survivors remember and reactivate the basic elements of the spiritual life, they will themselves be remembered. Our remembering is met by divine remembrance of the faithful, bringing them grace and mercy (Gn. 8:1; 19:29; 30:22; Ex. 32:13; 1 S. 1:11, 19; 25:31). In doing so, God creates or recreates a new situation among the remnant, remembering (making immediately real) above all His covenant, recommitting Himself to the grace promised (Gn. 9:15–16; Ex. 2:24; 6:5; Lv. 26:42; Ps. 104:8; 110:5; Ez. 16:60; 2 Macc. 1:2). Therefore, there is a clear connection between the saving action of God and effective remembering (Lk 1:54, 1:72). The effects of God’s gracious remembering re-manifest themselves among the members of the remembering remnant. The spark of light blazes up in one’s consciousness, from the hidden part of the heart, in all its brilliance (Staniloae 2002, p. 195). It is like the spreading light of a new dawn which begins to encompass everything. It is in this that the remnant fulfills its ultimate purpose. Having grasped the flame, preserved it, reignited it by means of remembrance, it now renews the Church and illuminates the world around it. Supported by renewed spiritual power, the survivors call others to follow, and new life will spread and reignite a new dawn for the

Church. This is how the lost will be found, how the repository of truth will be reacquired, dialog reenabled, and the ability to make moral discriminations rediscovered.

7. Conclusions

A new dark age has come upon us. Moral discourse in North America has been brought to a near standstill by the widespread abandoning of truth in favor of personal opinion. This self-centeredness, often expressed in unrestrained quest for material wealth, has fragmented, isolated, and so corrupted the workings of contemporary society that knowledge is being lost, history is being disregarded, and expertise is being abandoned. Living in opinion bubbles, most are left to their own devices, to define their own knowledge, truth, and morality. This cannot and will not turn out well. Intensifying the darkness is the sad fact that many Christians, who could speak truth to power, who could bear witness to the light, have themselves been morally bankrupted, incapacitated, by aligning themselves with the very thought and behavior that is destroying culture at large. For that reason, they are often seen as hypocrites, or even worse, as betrayers of the teaching and person of Christ, no longer in need of being troubled by what should be the consciousness-rattling effects of inconsistency. That tension, it seems, has been “resolved” by utter capitulation. If those who are to bring the light are themselves swallowed up by the darkness, what is to be done?

During the dark ages of the past, there always were a few spiritual survivors who gathered around the sparks of light in order to preserve that which was being lost and in the hope of nurturing it back to full brilliance in their own lives and from there back into the Church and society. Known variously as ascetics, monastics, even solitaries, these members of the spiritual remnant gathered and actively remembered truly Christian teachings and practices, spiritual knowledge and disciplines, and thus saved them from the death of disremembering, making them real and present once again.

Is one to simply wait for some new Benedict to ignite another monastic movement? Are individuals to deliberately assume a neo-monastic way of living in contrast to, as a protest against the darkness? Are believers to develop some new program, some novel set of activities? Does one refocus attention on the existing monasteries? Indeed, there are already, at least in the Orthodox world, many monastic communities in which the light of truth is being preserved. While they have, at times, and certainly could once again provide a context for remnant activity, they exist today at some remove from local parishes and for that reason have little direct influence on the lives of ordinary parishioners. What history has shown us is that the remnant has always been activated within the Church. Spiritual survivors aided by the grace of God recognize one another and are naturally drawn together by their desire to preserve the light. They may, on their own, seek out fellow survivors with whom they can study the scriptures, develop spiritual practices, relearn the art of prayer. However, what is needed today is first and foremost parishioners, priests, and pastors who by God’s grace develop a remnant awareness and begin to promote Church-wide awareness and acknowledgement of the remnant. Recognizing the work already being done, these “prophets” will intentionally encourage the spiritual desire of the remnant and nurture it by creating in-Church opportunities for the survivors to gather, remember, and reignite. These survivors are already here with us, and it will not take much encouragement for their spark to enflame and reillumine the whole Church.

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Notes

- ¹ Throughout this essay, a distinction is made between the Church as such and the specific instances of that ideal (Churches or churches). Moreover, the theological affirmations of the Eastern Orthodox tradition as to the conditions under which a group can legitimately be called a Church are consistently applied. Unlike the device used by Vatican II (Church/separated brethren), the Church is capitalized when referring to that Orthodox definition and used in lower case to refer to other Christian groupings. This is not meant to call into question the faith of those who worship and serve in non-Orthodox Christian fellowships. It is simply an attempt to use the terms in a manner consistent with the definitions and theological affirmations of my own Church.
- ² For an extensive overview of this aspect of language, semantics, and philosophy, see (Gasparri and Marconi 2021).
- ³ There are, of course, other meanings of the term “Orthodox,” but this is how it is used here.
- ⁴ See my discussion on identity and belonging in (Rommen 2009).
- ⁵ A number of observers have been using the term “conservative Christian” to describe an amorphous group of individuals who appear to be Christian, still identify themselves as Christian (mostly Evangelical), but are united in their commitment to conservative politics and social policy rather than the theological and historical factors mentioned above. In other words, the term “conservative Christian” is not used by these authors to gather together diverse members of some faith community-transcending consensus, but is rather an expression of perceived alliances between self-identified Christians and certain political and social orientations. Consider the words of Kobes Du Mez, “For conservative white evangelicals, the ‘good news’ of the Christian gospel has become inextricably linked to a staunch commitment to patriarchal authority, gender difference, and Christian nationalism, and all of these are intertwined with white racial identity. Many Americans who now identify as evangelicals are identifying with this operational theology ... ” (Du Mez 2020).
- ⁶ Merriam–Webster defines “evangelical” as “emphasizing salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of preaching as contrasted with ritual.”
- ⁷ This has been going on since the 1960s when people like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and others got a taste for political power at a national level and terms like the “moral majority” came into vogue (see (Andersen 2017)).
- ⁸ One of the most shocking expressions of this alignment came on January 06, 2021, when a mob of seditionists motivated by the conspiracy theory that the 2020 election had been “stolen,” besieged and attacked the US Capitol. “At the siege, the presence of white conservative Christians was unmistakable. The Proud Boys stopped to pray to Jesus on their march toward the Capitol, and the crowd held signs proclaiming Jesus saves and god’s word calls them out. One flag read Jesus is my savior. Trump is my president” (Kerby 2021).
- ⁹ “Skeptics may henceforth be disinclined to consider Christianity because they’ll think of hypocrisy when they think of evangelicals” (Godwin 2020).
- ¹⁰ Obviously, the Reformation itself would seem to belie this idea, and it did open the floodgates of division and radical separatism. Nevertheless, many others—the Eastern ascetics, Medieval Western monastics, and many within the churches spawned by the Reformation—have been rather more cautious and have often chosen to remain and seek reform within the groups they belong to.

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