

The church in the whirlwind

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue



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As Abraham Lincoln struggled to make sense of a war that threatened to tear apart the United States, a pastor reassured him that God was on the side of the Union Army. But Lincoln rejected this comfort by claiming, in his Second Inaugural Address: “The Almighty has his own purposes.”

Most of the time when the church gets in trouble it’s because we think God and we are on the same side. At its best, the church first has strived to encounter the Almighty in the midst of a whirlwind that destroys what was once known. When the church emerged, it quickly lost its protected exempt status as a sect of Judaism and became a treasonous outlawed cult. For the next 300 years it developed its identity as a persecuted church. All of the early theologies and liturgies were formed as a response to the whirlwind of persecution from the dominant culture.

Then Emperor Constantine was converted, which ended the persecutions. A generation later everyone had to be baptized to retain Roman citizenship. It was another whirlwind that changed everything in the life and theology of the church which was struggling to figure out the purposes of the Almighty.

After the fall of Rome and centuries of social and economic decline in Europe, the church found a spiritual response in the rise of monasticism, where an ordered and prayerful life sought the redemption by the Almighty of a dark world. Then the breakup of the Holy Roman Empire occurred in the 16th century with the development of European nation states. Some parts of the church made reforms with a new Protestant movement; others sought reforms within the Catholic Church. Each side had authentically theological claims, and both were responding to new economic and political realities.

At a reunion for our seminary's alumni from the class of 1965, I had heartbreaking conversations with pastors who grieve that they have not left the mainline church as strong as they found it despite 50 years of hard work. They were faithful in their moment, but that moment was destined to blow away.

Here are the roots of the retired pastors' grief. After Enlightenment rationality emerged in the 18th century, every quarter of the church had to make some response to the claim that truth could be found apart from supernatural revelation. Some in the American church embraced this conviction and developed a new liberal theology, even though their affirmations could be found in much earlier theologies. Ironically, the fundamentalists who wanted to maintain the old theologies developed a doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible, which was both a brand new theology and one built on the categories of the Enlightenment.

When that whirlwind calmed into modernity, each side left us an Almighty that appeared less almighty—or at least less necessary.

Modernity had core convictions about things like the basic goodness of humanity, the inevitability of progress, the benefits of technology, and the capacity to educate the masses into freedom from evil. The church was an eager partner in all of this promise. For the first half of the 20th century no one really worried too much about the separation of church and state. Your Sunday school teacher could be your public school teacher, your football coach, and your Scout leader and was expected to be able to pray at any of these meetings. In those days we were all working together to be "one nation under God."

Yet after two horrible world wars and the discovery of multiple holocausts, it became difficult to keep speaking about the basic goodness of an enlightened, educated humanity. Technology allowed us to invent weapons that could destroy the world.

Missionary-blessed colonialism turned out to be the religious legitimization of imperialism. The civil rights movement eventually convinced many that the modern project was really just about buttressing the privileges of white families.

Then postmodern intellectual claims dismantled all metanarratives, including the one the Protestant church had pulled over its society like a sacred canopy. Globalism introduced us to the realities that other people with other religions were also worshipping the Almighty.

Every time I go to a denominational meeting that is still trying to defend its modernist assumptions I feel like a dinosaur who sticks his head up after the meteor hits and says, "Uh, oh."

Lincoln was right. God was never on our side. Maybe the greatest blessing of the postmodern deconstruction is that it will return our attention to the uniquely sacred purposes of the Almighty in the midst of every whirlwind. As the embattled Lincoln would counsel us, let us humbly make every change in the church necessary to pray that we are on the side of God in this new day.