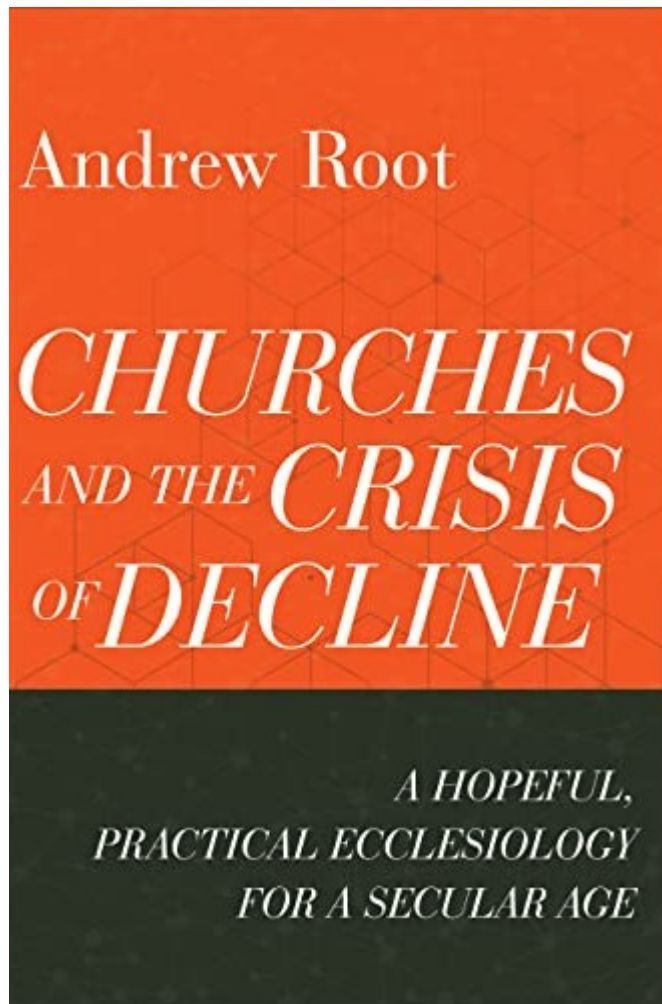


What is the church's true crisis of decline?

It's probably not what you think.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Churches and the Crisis of Decline

A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age

By Andrew Root
Baker Academic

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For the better part of a year, I've been toting an Andrew Root book around in my knapsack. First it was a library copy of the sunny yellow *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, followed immediately thereafter by my own copy of the blue-hued *The Pastor in a Secular Age*. (I realized partway through the first book in the trilogy I needed my own set so I could mark up the margins.) I intended to continue on to the green *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, but then I learned that the series was unexpectedly becoming a tetralogy with the imminent publication of this orange book on crisis. I'll no doubt double back to catch the volume I missed, but Root's latest is worth leapfrogging over whatever book is next on your to-read list. This is the book we need now.

Root is a professor of youth ministry who has been immersing himself in the work of Charles Taylor, particularly his influential brick of a book *A Secular Age*. Like Robert Jost, Alissa Wilkinson, and James K. A. Smith before him, Root places Taylor's concepts in conversation with practical theology to great effect. It's as though Root gathers up an armload of theological quandaries, pastoral anxieties, and cultural observations and runs them through the wash on hot, letting the whole load get thoroughly colored by Taylorian philosophy.

With *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, Root adds another major material to the mix: the life and legacy of Karl Barth, particularly his early years as a pastor. Root acknowledges that his approach is somewhat atypical; for one thing, he anachronistically reinterprets the early writings of Barth in an explicitly Taylorian structure. He does this not for the sake of ivory-tower Barthians but for local pastors who are trying to figure out how to keep their declining congregations afloat.

This strikes me as a nervy move. Root surely knows that most harried pastors are not turning to Barth for guidance these days, especially not regarding the best practices for church growth and revitalization. We have a raft of expert consultants on hand, eagerly selling us the ten steps, seven lessons, and three tricks to save our moribund mainline churches. There is a bit of a bait and switch here, albeit a well intentioned and beneficial one. Root is not primarily concerned with the crisis churches *think* they're having, which is a lack of resources and relevance. He identifies a far more critical crisis than underfunded budgets and empty pews: we are fallible human beings encased in an immanent frame all but incapable of recognizing or responding to the living God, the "God who is God."

Barth was always going on about the crisis at the heart of human/divine encounters, namely, such encounters are all but impossible because of the vast chasm between Creator and created. We can never find God but can only be found through God's action. Immersing himself in a Barthian framework, Root writes, "It's only a dialectical theology that allows us to remember that God is God, wholly other than us, and yet to encounter this God as living, waiting for this God by joyfully embracing life. The life is in the dialectic."

If life is in the dialectic, and the dialectic is lost in the secular age, it is no wonder that so many of our mainline churches are lifeless. Root rails against this modern phenomenon:

Cultural Protestantism could exist, even look similar to its radical form, just without the dialectic. Protestantism as a civic religion could be tamed enough not to bite the immanent frame. But to do the taming, Protestantism's dialectical teeth would need to be removed. . . . Without its dialectic, Protestantism is a particularly flat and vapid form of religion, absent even bells and smells. But to have its safe place in the immanent frame, Protestantism needed to forget (even dislike) the confession that life is found in death, grace in judgment, community in confession, justification in sinners, and that being lost is the only way to be found.

In other words, Root is challenging declining congregations to stop centering their own survival and redirect their attention toward waiting for the God who is God to act in their midst.

If you think all this sounds a bit theoretical, you're right. This volume is the most intellectually challenging of the Ministry in a Secular Age series, and that's saying something. There were a number of paragraphs in this book I had to read multiple times in order to wrap my mind around them, and even then I'd sometimes give up and move on, acquiescing to the fact that I'm just not quite smart enough to comprehend highly academic theology.

Thankfully, Root is wise enough not to let his ideas float around in a fog of abstraction. Woven into every chapter is the unfolding story of a fictional church called St. John the Baptist. I tend to have little patience for narratives constructed to convey ideas, but in this case, it works. Indeed, it works so well that I found myself utterly enthralled by the plot and rooting for the characters. The whole story line is a

great *what if*.

What if instead of scrounging for resources and scrambling for relevance, a path that results in former church buildings becoming hip brewpubs, the congregation had embraced the real crisis? Root spins an alternative trajectory that is dialectical at every turn. Life in death, grace in judgment, community in confession, justification in sinners, and getting lost to be found are all given fictional flesh. It does not ultimately matter that Bert, Sue, Woz, and Herbert are not in fact real people; they nonetheless encounter a God who is God, and it is a beautiful thing to witness.

Root might have pretended to write a book about the crisis of church decline, but the subtitle contains no lie. This is a hopeful and practical ecclesiology for a secular age. I hope it makes its way into a lot of pastors' knapsacks.