**Assignment 3:**

**Persuasive Essay**

**“The Lost Gospel**

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PHI-815 History of the Integration of Religion & Society

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**Introduction**

Mainline Protestant churches have long been a defining force in Western religious and cultural life. Over the centuries, denominations such as the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Presbyterian Church have stood the test of time, shaping the lives of millions. However, a shift happened within religious circles. This shift was the information age. The widespread use of digital platforms, particularly social media, has dramatically altered and in some cases limited the way churches connect with their congregations. The church has many more options to share its message. However, each church is limited by the amount of resources to provide a well produced event. These well-produced events have been the focus and shape within church growth movements. Matthew Everhart critiques the contemporary trend of "worshiptainment," in his book, *Worshiptainment The Modern Church's Golden Calf,* explaining thata blend of worship and entertainment that has become common in many modern churches. Everhart argues that this trend has led to a shallow, consumer-driven understanding of worship that prioritizes entertainment and emotional stimulation over true spiritual engagement and reverence toward God (Everhart, 2019). This trend is not anything new. In fact, the church has been engaging in this consumer-driven, shallow worship war for some time. It has shrunk the gospel into something emotional. This is why many prominent mega-churches have created a “guru-style” preacher. There is a stage and the minister gives good life lessons and ties the Bible in there somehow (Everhart, 2019). Yet, the mainline church has tried to stay “above the fray.” However, this researcher doesn’t agree. Instead, the mainline church has jumped deep into the emotional gospel movement. The mainline church has moved toward a non-offensive gospel and washed it down. This movement has hindered and hurt the church socially and theologically. Therefore, even though mainline churches are resilient, and they have stood the test of time, main line churches have lost their gospel evidenced by its massive decline across denominational lines and lack of interest in social and political spheres.

**The decline**

One of the most comprehensive examinations of the decline in mainline Protestant churches is found in the work of J.W. Clarke. Clarke’s study, “The Decline of the Mainline Protestant Church,” offers a historical and sociological perspective on how the shift in cultural values, especially in the Western world, has led to the church’s waning influence. He writes, “Mainline denominations have faced serious decline for some years due to a privatized faith, which has replaced the shared faith of an earlier time; and due to the loss of a sense of purpose” (Clarke, 2002). Supporting Clarke’s findings, Thom Rainer in *The Autopsy of a Deceased Church* describes churches as suffering from a “death spiral.” According to Rainer, the decline is not merely a statistical issue but a theological and structural crisis (Rainer 2014). While Rainer focuses on the theological and Clarke offers a sociological, this writing desires to appeal to both. It is important to note that while secularism plays a major role, internal factors within the church also contribute significantly to the decline. Julia Duin, in her book *Quitting Church,* discusses how the shift in focus from ministry and community to institutional preservation has alienated many faithful congregants. She argues that the “Quitting Church” phenomenon, where dedicated members of Protestant denominations leave their local congregations, stems from a perceived lack of spiritual depth and relevance. Part of this lack of spiritual depth and relevance has come from the shift in cultural values, as Clarke explains. However, another aspect involves the theological, as Rainer expresses. However, this paper differs from Rainer’s conclusions. Rainer contends that churches that have lost touch with their foundational purpose, ignored spiritual vitality, or failed to adapt to cultural changes ultimately face extinction (Rainer, 2014). But. that is simply not the case. Instead, the mainline churches are constantly changing. In fact, each mainline denomination continues to make changes to its constitution through its various forms of amendments, all in efforts to adapt to cultural changes. Notwithstanding, the deepest change, that is theological, but has social implications is the mainline’s overall adoption of universalism. Universalism, in plain terms, is the belief that everyone goes to Heaven. God loves everyone. Mainline churches have not adopted universalism, universally, but there is a growing trend. This is evidenced by Kronen and Reitan’ study in their article “Annihilation or Salvation?: A Philosophical Case for Preferring Universalism to Annihilationism” which presents arguments in favor of universalism, which some mainline theologians have also engaged with as a way of addressing the eternal destiny of humanity in a more inclusive and compassionate manner. While they are not speaking directly for all mainline churches, their argument represents an intellectual trend that has emerged in some circles within the mainline tradition. theological shift within mainline churches (Kronen & Reitan, 2022). Furthermore, theological complacency and the failure to address the deeper spiritual needs of congregants have played a key role in the erosion of the church’s influence. Fazzino addresses this issue in her work on evangelical deconversion narratives, emphasizing that many individuals leave the church because they feel spiritually unfulfilled by institutionalized religion that fails to speak to their personal and existential questions (Fazzino 2014).

**A Way Back**

The gospel has become marginalized and basically unnecessary. Sadly, this influence goes beyond theological emphasis, but extends toward the political and social spheres as well. Møller, in “Bringing the Church Back In”, argues that the church must continue to claim its role in public policy and social justice to remain relevant in today’s world. He suggests that the church isn’t detached from political and social issues. In fact, the church has always had some sort of influence. He writes, “I have quoted at length to hammer home a simple point: political and economic developments as well as state-building in Europe before 1500 A.D. cannot be understood without reference to ecclesiastical infrastructure and the religious teaching of the church” (Moller 2019, 213).

Moller is correct. The church has been resilient. It has been the forefront to much of Western Civilization ethics. N.T. Wright writes about these ethics, with a Christian mindset, in his book *Broken Signposts.* The book is structured around seven "broken signposts," which represent aspects of the world that are often disordered or fractured but are also signs of a deeper truth that Christianity can illuminate. Out of the seven broken signposts, this paper has focused on broken spirituality. He suggests that spirituality, in its purest sense, is meant to point people toward the transcendent, the divine reality, and the ultimate meaning of life. However, in the modern world, spirituality is often fragmented or misdirected, with many people seeking spiritual fulfillment in ways that do not truly address the deeper needs of the human soul (Wright 2020). The world wants something more. This more is what shapes their social construction, as Joshua Reichard speaks about in his youtube video. He explains that social constructionism is a sociological theory that explores how individuals and groups create and maintain social realities through shared meanings and interactions. It posits that many aspects of our lives, including norms, values, knowledge, and identities, are not inherently natural or fixed but are socially constructed through language, culture, and social practices (Reichard, 2020, 12:40). In order to address the social construct it has created, it needs to understand how its theological positions have made God optional.

**Conclusion**

The decline of mainline Protestant churches is a multifaceted issue, rooted in theological, institutional, and societal factors. However, the church has remained resilient and very fluid. Unfortunately, within its fluidity, it overcorrected. It engaged in an emotional based gospel that only addresses feelings and doesn’t have substance. Therefore, the mainline churches have continued losing their gospel message, embracing universalism. Sadly, this has been part of its downfall because of the evidenced decline across denominational lines and lack of interest in social and political spheres. The mainline church has tried to continue to adapt both theologically and socially to contemporary cultural shifts. However, some of the adaptations have contributed significantly to the church's diminished relevance. However, by re-engaging with the gospel message, revitalizing spiritual practices, and addressing contemporary social issues, mainline Protestantism has the potential to recover its relevance and renew its mission in the modern world. It can fix the “broken signpost and re-engage” the world with the life changing message that there is much more going on with God and the gospel message.

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## First Draft

[Download as Word Document](https://www.ogsdial.org/system/assignment_word.php?ASSIGNMENT_ID=9772)

1. Write a 5-page argumentative essay on your selected topic. [5 pages have been submitted **√]**

2. Paper Outline

a. Begin with an introductory paragraph that clearly states your topic, its importance,

and your position has a succinct thesis statement.

a. Address the topic of the paper with critical thought. Include logical arguments

and literature references to support the main points and sub-points of your

position. Include counterarguments, along with logical reasons for rejecting

them.

b. Add section headers to your paper that match your outline.

b. End with a conclusion that reaffirms your thesis.

c. Use a minimum of eleven scholarly research sources (two books and the remaining

scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles).

1. Introduction
2. Description of problem/Hook
3. Setting the environment & counterclaim
4. Last sentence Thesis statement
5. MAIN ARGUMENT #1
   1. Supporting Point #1
   2. Supporting Point #2
   3. Supporting Point #3
6. MAIN ARGUMENT #2
   1. Supporting Point #1
   2. Supporting Point #2
   3. Supporting Point #3
7. MAIN COUNTER ARGUMENT AGAINST MAIN ARGUEMENT#1
   1. Supporting Point #1
   2. Supporting Point #2
   3. Supporting Point #3
8. MAIN COUNTER ARGUMENT AGAINST MAIN ARGUMENT #2
   1. Supporting Point #1
   2. Supporting Point #2
   3. Supporting Point #3
9. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
   1. Stating and comparing argument & counterargument
10. Frame the sociological integration of faith/religion and society

# Analysis through Sociological Theory

* + - 1. (Example: *Symbolic Interactionism*: assumes a functional unity in which all parts of the system (society - institutions, roles, norms…) work together
      2. Apply the chosen theory to the problem.
      3. Explain how this theory aids in understanding the issue.
  1. **Faith Analysis through N.T. Wright’s 7 Universal longings** Utilize NT Wright's "7 universal human longings" (Justice, Spirituality, Relationships, Beauty, Freedom, Truth, Power) for analysis. **Note**: *try to keep your choice of 7 universal longings to the one that is most pertinent to your topic of research. (secure a copy of N.T. Wright’s book)*

1. ***Choose one passage of scripture*** *highlights the universal longing you have chosen.*
2. *Cite One academic journal article that supports your position on that Scripture.*

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH--Go back, revisit and restate thesis statement as your concluding remarks.