

# The Church Has No Future Or Bankruptcy Isn't All Bad

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[Note: *This piece is long. My apologies. It comes from a forthcoming book out in February.*]

It's been a live question throughout modernity, but seem particularly poignant in this moment: Will the church have a future? Is there any reason for Christianity to exist? Inside sad and conflicted times, this is an open question. One that haunts pastors. Are you simply whistling past the grave? Must you find new, more engaging reasons to pastor than proclaiming the gospel to human souls who face death and loss?

Those leading congregations and denominations feel this anxiety. Most think it's plausible that the church (even Christianity itself) could just disappear. But is it *possible* for the church and the Christian (even Christianity itself) to disappear? In our modern imaginations, what could destroy Christianity, pulling the church into dissolution? Clearly not an earthquake, like what took Atlantis, or an evil that brings divine judgment and a word of destruction like the fourteenth-century reformers heralded against the pope in Avignon. Our vision of dissolution is much more banal and flat. Here in late modernity, we assume that what could take down the church is its own inability, as an institution, to reach self-fulfillment. The church and Christianity might fail to procure the resources and relevance the institution needs to have a future.

We actually believe that if we're not careful, the church could just disappear without even a notice, and by extension, all Christians with it (and not in the *Left Behind* way but in the Blockbuster Video way). The church could sadly become like Kmart, just a foggy memory. There'd be no gnashing of teeth, no falling steeples, no shaking and cracking earth below, just a

whimpering disappearance, death by a thousand paper cuts of irrelevance. Self-fulfillment is such a powerful structure shaping our imaginations that we think that without it even the church will be vaporized by the future. Without the ability to produce its own self-fulfillment, the church and Christianity will have no future.

But is this possible? Could the church and Christianity just *disappear* on this side of *Parousia*?

Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy thinks not.

## Rosenstock-Huessy

If anyone should think the church could just disappear and Christianity could have no future, it's Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy.<sup>1</sup> Rosenstock-Huessy wrestled with the question of the future of Christianity in a time when many of the literal steeples and spires had recently fallen to the ground in flames and blood soaked the earth, crying out to God. He is of the generation that lived in Germany during the First and Second World Wars. Right before WWI, he had converted to Christianity. His cousin, Franz Rosenzweig, was going to follow in his footsteps. Franz admired Eugen greatly. After an all-night discussion (the *Leipzigspractnach*) on the place and future of Christianity, Rosenzweig, convinced by Rosenstock-Huessy's proclamation of the work of God and the place of Christianity, decided to remain a Jew instead of casting off his religion altogether. Rosenstock-Huessy's vision of the gospel was so faithful, and his commitment to Jesus Christ so sure, that it turned Rosenzweig back to the faith of Israel.

In the aftermath of World War II, with the West coming to grips with such overwhelming devastation and evil, Rosenstock-Huessy published *The Christian Future* in 1946. The book

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<sup>1</sup> After he was married he hyphenated his name, making his full name Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy.

sought to address two questions. Was the church in peril? If so, what was Christianity's future? The assumption was clear, and one that many of us share today. If we answer in the affirmative that the church is in peril, then clearly Christianity has a troubling, even bleak and sad, future. The logic goes like this: if the church is in jeopardy, Christianity needs saving. These two questions are inseparably correlated in a direct sequential logic. Because the church is endangered, its own self-fulfillment is unreachd and therefore its institutional existence is in question. Christianity itself faces a clear and present danger. These are indeed sad, even devastating, times in which Christianity needs saving.

Just pause and think about that for a second. The confession of faith in Jesus Christ is the claim that Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension saves the world. His life frees the cosmos from death by Christ dying then overcoming death with life. Christianity is the cleaving to the body of Jesus Christ who does this cosmic saving. And yet, here in late modernity we think we must save Jesus Christ, giving Christianity a future. The hubris is intense.

Rosenstock-Huessy's book was released in 1946, but these are the same questions, with the same presumed logic, that drive many congregations to imagine that they are on a dangerous edge and need a consultant, or program, or innovation to quickly give them a future. But what if Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy was that consultant? What would Rosenstock-Huessy say to a denominational gathering? He would tell the group the same thing he told his readers just months after the end of WWII. He'd tell them that "'saving' Christianity is unnecessary, undesirable, impossible, because it is anti-Christian. Christianity says that he who tries to save his soul shall lose it."<sup>2</sup> Any individual or institution that seeks to flee sad times for its own self-fulfillment will,

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<sup>2</sup> Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *The Christian Future: Or the Modern Mind Outrun* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1946), 61.

like Peter (Mark 14; Luke 22; Matt. 26), deny Jesus Christ. Anyone who thinks that they can wield a sword, again like Peter (John 18), and save the Savior, chopping off ears through impassioned effort, is deeply confused.

In the 1946 book, Rosenstock-Huessy does something amazing that no consultant, or even practical theologian, would dare. He breaks the sequential logic. Remember the questions Rosenstock-Huessy addresses. The first: Is the church in peril? He answers yes: in the dark shadow cast by the A-bombs and concentration camps in relation to a Christian Germany, indeed it is. In our own time, the church is nearing or at bankruptcy. It cannot cash in its resources to reach its own self-fulfillment.

Then comes the second question: Does this impoverished peril—this bankruptcy of resources—mean that Christianity has no future? If the church is in peril, is Christianity refuted and pathetic? Following the sequential logic, it appears that the answer to this second question is clear. If the church is in peril, Christianity is too, right?

But, shockingly, Rosenstock-Huessy breaks completely with the sequential logic. He denies a sequential logic for a sacramental one. He answers no to this second question. He insists it is quite the opposite, telling his readers, “Yes, Christianity is bankrupt today. But not refuted. Christianity has repeatedly been bankrupt. When it goes bankrupt, it begins over again; therein rests its power.”<sup>3</sup> Therein lies the church’s conformity to the body of Jesus Christ. Therein lies the sacramental logic of the infinite entering into the finite, finding union in opposites. *When Christianity faces death, it lives.*

Shockingly, Rosenstock-Huessy believes that bankruptcy is the sign that assures Christianity of its future. Let that sink in. It’s bad math, but Rosenstock-Huessy is drawing more

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<sup>3</sup> Rosenstock-Huessy, *Christian Future*, 89.

from Jesus's parables of the kingdom being built on bad economic mathematics (like the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one, the  $1 > 99$  of Matt. 18) than he is drawing on Descartes's mathematical decoding. But even with this backward kingdom math, Christianity is not just a madness that shouts irrational things into the wind, like  $2 + 2 = \text{lasagna}$ . Rather, Christianity believes in this interrupted sequential logic not because it is mad but because the church has been renewed by the Holy Spirit again and again out of its bankruptcy.

The church holds to this sacramental logic, evident when, before his arrest, Jesus breaks bread and pours out wine as his body and blood (Matt. 26). The bankruptcy that saves is manifest on Holy Saturday and then in Jerusalem before the coming of the Spirit in Acts 2. Being bankrupt, embracing poverty, is where the church finds its renewal. The church's beginning comes from the renewal that emerges from the bankruptcy of the loss and confusion of the cross. Rosenstock-Huussy believes that ending and restarting is the very blessing that Christianity brings to the world. This blessing can happen only by letting go and entering the dark waiting of God's renewing life of light.

Rosenstock-Huussy believes that the confession of faith in Jesus Christ is a way of experiencing the light in the dark; this is his sacramental nature. The mission of the church is to be present at the end of cycles of death, participating in the redemption of the world by ministering to the world. Renewal is found not in the innovation of new resources but in dying for the sake of others. New life is in the confession that dying itself is infused with God's ministering presence. Evangelism is central to Christianity, but *only if it wears these marks of a sacramental dying for the sake of others*. The life of Christianity is found not in the prospect of its own self-fulfillment, but in its willingness to confess brokenness (bankruptcy) and in faith anticipate renewal. The faithful know that this renewal comes not from our effort but as a gift

bound to our confession of bankruptcy. Renewal happens when the church stops thinking about itself and seeks to love the world, treating this encounter with the world as an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ.

Rosenstock-Huessy says, “Christianity is the power to open and to close cycles; hence it is not cyclical itself, but is able to contain many cycles, and periods, spirals and lines.”<sup>4</sup> The church is always present at the end of these cycles, periods, spirals, and lines, helping birth a new time, not by trying to produce a new epoch but by ministering to others in love and suffering. This redemptive work of loving the world changes the world. Christianity, Rosenstock-Huessy believes, is a source of redemption when it abandons its own self-fulfillment and seeks to enter death to minister to others. When Christianity does this, its life is renewed (by giving its life away, Matt. 16:25) and new cycles in history are opened up. Christianity renews the world by living as a sacrament in the world, loving the world more than the life of its own institutions, more than its own self-fulfillment.

This kind of redemptive work is the church’s mission. Rosenstock-Huessy in many ways is the original missional theologian. He believes the church, from head to toe, must be missional. Christianity itself cannot be faithful without being missional. The church cannot be faithful to the Christian confession without moving out into the world, bearing the world’s cycles, redeeming and shifting them. Good pastoral ministry, therefore, is not actions done to secure the church’s resources but entering into a shared sacramental life by sharing in sorrow and suffering. This is salvation. Pastoral ministry is the mission of sharing in the life of the world, suffering in the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenstock-Huessy, *Christian Future*, 84.

But the centrality of mission can be kept from corruption only if the sequential logic of the questions that Rosenstock-Huessy's book addresses are decoupled and their dialectical/sacramental nature embraced.<sup>5</sup> Mission become destructive rather than redemptive when the church fears its bankruptcy. When we believe that the church must procure its own self-fulfillment for Christianity to have a future pastoral ministry becomes warped. Only when the church confesses its brokenness and opens its hands to give and receive—knowing that this confession of brokenness is the only path of renewal—can its mission participate in redemption. Only when the church confesses both that it is bankrupt and that its future is secure can its mission be shaped by the cross.

## Renewal in the Three Millennia

Ministry entails dying to the world as the way of loving, and therefore participating in and redeeming, the world and renewing the church. Rosenstock-Huessy sees this renewal out of bankruptcy happening in each of the three millennia of the church's life. In the first millennium, the dying occurred in the church's refusal to worship false gods and demons. Martyrs and hermits renewed the church out of its bankruptcy. The martyr has everything taken away, life itself and even the dignity of a good death. The hermit renounces all forms of living other than the bankrupt life of poverty in the desert, where nothing grows and self-sustaining is nearly impossible. Both the martyr and the hermit deny any fulfillment that would come from the gods of Caesar. This frees the world from the capricious rage of the cacophony of the pantheon of gods and their blood sacrifices. The blood of the martyr forever ends the river of ritual blood

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<sup>5</sup> By "dialectic" I mean the seemingly opposed ideas that the church is bankrupt and yet still secure. It's only in leaning into this seeming incongruity that we can find a deep truth.

sacrifice. The church, by embracing this bankruptcy of the life of the martyr and the hermit, is renewed, and the world is transformed.

In the second millennium, the Caesars come from within. Rulers and kings, with decree and cavalry, convert whole lands and tribes. The church swells overnight. Its coffers are full, but its spirit is bankrupt. The leaders are too corrupted by power, the laity too easily sliding back into paganism. In the second millennium, the Western church becomes aware of the bankruptcy of its disobedience. Starting in the eleventh century, the martyr and hermit are replaced by the reforming monks. The core practice for the monk and laity alike is to walk, becoming a pilgrim. The church is renewed as pilgrims aim themselves toward the holy and abandon all else to seek it. The pilgrim prepares to die, giving a last will and testament, and then joins the trail, often walking barefoot, toward a holy place. Along the way the pilgrim relies on the kindness of others, blessing those met with prayers. The pilgrim's paths knit the world together, concretely making those of different lands, once of warring tribes, into companions. The church is renewed, and the world is blessed, when the church embraces the bankruptcy of the pilgrim's way as the shape of its very life. The pilgrim and reformer, the reformer as the pilgrim, is the renewing mission of the second millennium.

Rosenstock-Huessy is not yet in the third millennium when he writes his book. But he's close enough to see the shape of mission and the place of renewal. He says, "Mission and conversion will continue as long as the soul loses her path and needs regeneration. . . . The temptations of our time do not arise from heavenly demonism [as in the first millennium] or earthly provincialism [as in the second millennium]. *They come from soul erosion.* Our life is haunted by boredom and neurosis; it is disintegrated. . . . We are tempted to worship crude



vitality, sensationalism, life at any price.”<sup>6</sup> The pressure of our all-out pursuit of happiness as the measure of self-fulfillment has eroded our souls.

Rosenstock-Huessy is prophesying now. These realities leaked through the cracks of life in the second half of the twentieth century. But, for the most part, the soul erosion of boredom, neurosis, and disintegration were held at bay. Even in the 1990s, it could be assumed that the dam walls would hold. But they didn’t. Now in the third decade of the third millennium, soul erosion is everywhere, and yet we still, with even more force, seek happiness and self-fulfillment. We are now fully embedded in sad times. Our very ways of seeking self-fulfillment measured by happiness have tempted us, as Rosenstock-Huessy foresaw, into worshiping crude vitality and sensationalisms in all sorts of digital spaces: social media sites, Pornhub, Amazon, and more. We’ve also entered a time where a politics that matches *my life, my identity* must be fought for at any price—even the cost of decency, honesty, kindness, mercy, and humanity. It’s a way of life fueled by fear and hate. Though we all are seeking so badly to be happy and sure of our own self-fulfillment, we’re compelled to fear and hate those who put at risk our own self-fulfillment. We are so sad (and anxious and angry because of it) that we rarely stop to spot the depth of erosion in our souls. We know, at one level, that our soul is eroding, but we ultimately feel powerless to stop it.

It is into this bankruptcy that the church is called. Into this bankruptcy the pastor in our epoch is to lead. Christianity’s renewal is possible only inside embracing and joining this poverty, for this is what leads us to the cross. Renewal is always contingent on the embrace of poverty (not creativity and genius). Renewal is dependent on a mission of martyrdom, or pilgrimage, or, (as I develop in the larger project in which this piece rests), consolation. The

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<sup>6</sup> Rosenstock-Huessy, *Christian Future*, 121 (emphasis added).

church will always be tempted to seek its own self-fulfillment and fear its own bankruptcy or brokenness. But as Rosenstock-Huessy has pointed out, only by losing itself in a mission that joins these sad times will the church find the Spirit generating renewal through the redemptive work of bringing life out of death.