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# Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: David Brooks and the Limits of Sociology

*What sociology cannot do is deal with the most important question of all — the truth question.*

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By the late 1960s, liberal Protestants began asking a rather difficult question. Why were the conservative churches growing? In retrospect, one aspect of the liberal Protestant crisis was reflected in that very question. The mainline Protestant denominations would have been better served by asking why their own churches were declining.

Commissioned by the National Council of Churches, researcher Dean M. Kelley set out to find out why conservative churches were growing, even as the more liberal churches were declining. In his 1972 book, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion*, Kelley argued that evangelical churches grow precisely because they do what the more liberal congregations and denominations intentionally reject — they make serious demands of believers in terms of doctrine and behavior.

“Amid the current neglect and hostility toward organized religion in general,” Kelley noted, “the conservative churches, holding to seemingly outmoded theology and making strict demands on their members, have equalled or surpassed in growth the early percentage increases of the nation’s population.”

With amazing insight and candor, Kelley spoke for mainline Protestantism when he noted that it had been generally assumed that churches, “if they want to succeed, will be reasonable, rational, courteous, responsible, restrained, and receptive to outside criticism.” These churches would be highly concerned with preserving “a good image in the world” — and that meant especially within the world of the cultural elites. These churches, intending to grow, would be “democratic and gentle in their internal affairs” — as the larger world defines those qualities. These churches will intend to be cooperative with other religious groups in order to meet common goals, and thus “will not let dogmatism, judgmental moralism, or obsessions with cultic purity stand in the way of such cooperation and service.”

Then, Kelley dropped his bomb: “These expectations are a recipe for the failure of the religious enterprise, and arise from a mistaken view of what success in religion is and how it should be fostered and measured.”

Kelley then presented his considerable wealth of research and reflection on the phenomenon of conservative growth and liberal decline. “Strong” religious movements make demands of their members in terms of both belief and behavior. These churches demand adherence to highly defined doctrines that are to be received, believed, and taught without compromise. They also understand themselves to be separate from the larger secular culture, and the requirements of membership in the church define a distance from secular beliefs and behaviors.



The liberal churches are, by their own decision, opposed to these very principles. The mainline Protestant churches desired to be taken seriously and respected by the intellectual elites. They wanted the benefits of cultural acceptance and esteem. They lowered doctrinal and behavioral requirements and made membership more a matter of personal preference than of theological conviction.

Kelley concluded: “To the person who is concerned about the future of the ecumenical churches, this theory can offer little encouragement. The mainline denominations will continue to exist on a diminishing scale for decades, perhaps for centuries, and will continue to supply some people with a dilute and undemanding form of meaning, which may be all they want.”

In a recent column in *The New York Times*, David Brooks raised similar issues, this time in the context of a review of “The Book of Mormon,” a popular production on Broadway. In Brooks’ view, the show “ridicules Mormonism but not the Mormons, who are loopy but ultimately admirable.”

In the course of his column, Brooks made this observation:

*Many religious doctrines are rigid and out of touch. But religion itself can do enormous good as long as people take religious teaching metaphorically and not literally; as long as people understand that all religions ultimately preach love and service underneath their superficial particulars; as long as people practice their faiths open-mindedly and are tolerant of different beliefs.*

Hang in there — David Brooks is headed somewhere with this argument. He noted that many Americans “have always admired the style of belief that is spiritual but not doctrinal, pluralistic and not exclusive, which offers tools for serving the greater good but is not marred by intolerant theological judgments.”

And he is right, of course. This is an eloquent description of the religious disposition so well documented by Dean Kelley almost 40 years ago. This describes the mainline Protestant aspiration — to be seen as serving the public good without the taint of theological judgment.

But then Brooks dropped a bombshell of his own:

*The only problem with “The Book of Mormon” (you realize when thinking about it later) is that its theme is not quite true. Vague, uplifting, nondoctrinal religiosity doesn’t actually last. The religions that grow, succor and motivate people to perform heroic acts of service are usually theologically rigorous, arduous in practice and definite in their convictions about what is True and False.*

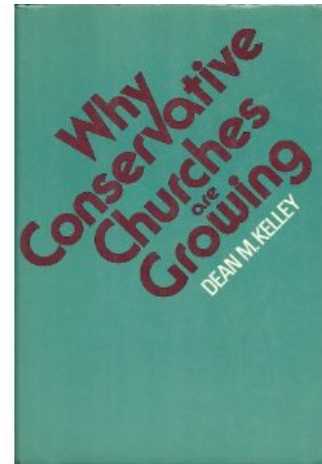
Further: “The religions that thrive have exactly what “The Book of Mormon” ridicules: communal theologies, doctrines and codes of conduct rooted in claims of absolute truth.”

Note that Brooks defined the “strong” profile of belief with terms such as “rigorous,” “arduous,” and “definite.” With considerable insight, Brooks informed his readers that rigorous theology “provides believers with a map of reality,” “allows believers to examine the world intellectually as well as emotionally,” “helps people avoid mindless conformity,” and “delves into mysteries in ways that are beyond most of us.”

Meanwhile, arduous codes of behavior and conduct “allow people to build their character.” Brooks explains that “regular acts of discipline can lay the foundation for extraordinary acts of self-control when it counts the most.”

Brooks concludes with a look at Africa, where conservative Protestantism is thriving. The Broadway show portrays the Africans accepting the liberal form of belief that would comfort the cultured antagonists of religion. Brooks knows that it is not so:

*I was once in an AIDS-ravaged village in southern Africa. The vague humanism of the outside do-gooders didn’t do*



*much to get people to alter their risky behavior. The blunt theological talk of the church ladies — right and wrong, salvation and damnation — seemed to have a better effect.*

In the span of just a few paragraphs, David Brooks made the same argument that Dean M. Kelley made in his book-length report on research nearly four decades ago.

There is a wealth of insight in both analyses. In the present context, evangelical Christians face many of the same questions asked by the liberal Protestant denominations in the 1960s and beyond. The main question is always deeply theological: Do we really believe that the message of the Gospel is the only message that offers salvation?

At this point, the limits of sociological research become clear. A sociological analysis can distinguish between stronger and weaker forms of faith and belief and can measure qualities such as rigor, ardor, and definiteness. Sociology can trace developments and offer research-based predictions about the future.

What sociology cannot do is deal with the most important question of all — the truth question. That is where Mormons and evangelical Christians part company. Orthodox Jews, Jesuits, and Jehovah's Witnesses all fall on the "strong" side of the sociological divide in their own way, but each has a completely distinct worldview based upon very different understandings of the truth. Mormons and Methodists have very different theologies, to say the least, but it takes a theologically informed Mormon and Methodist to know the difference.

Dean M. Kelley and David Brooks, each writing for a very different audience, have much to say to evangelical Christians. But, in the end, sociology can get us only so far and no further. The rigor, ardor, and energies of evangelical churches must not be held merely in a desire to hold to a form of religion that will grow, but in a biblical commitment to hold fast to the truth of the Gospel and to share that saving truth with the whole world.

We are left with what David Brooks described as the "blunt theological talk of the church ladies" in that African village — "right and wrong, salvation and damnation." Such is the Kingdom.

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at [mail@albertmohler.com](mailto:mail@albertmohler.com). Follow regular updates on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler](http://www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler)

David Brooks, "[Creed or Chaos](#)," *The New York Times*, Friday, April 22, 2011.

Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* [Mercer University Press, 1996 (originally published by Harper & Row in 1972)].

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