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Evangelicals in Wonderland: The Mainline Crisis

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Tuesday’s election of a homosexual bishop in the Episcopal Church casts a long shadow over evangelical hopes in the mainline. Ironically, this tragic event was juxtaposed with the cover story in the current issue of Christianity Today—the magazine that helped to forge the evangelical movement in the first place. [see Christianity Today’s web site] The magazine’s cover declares that evangelical renewal movements are “turning the mainline around.” Really?

Authors Michael S. Hamilton and Jennifer McKinney admit that “the mainline Protestant denominations seem as liberal in theology as ever.” Yet they describe the constellation of evangelical renewal movements that keep a conservative voice and presence within these churches. As the authors state, “They are committed to remaining within their denominations rather than leaving.”

These evangelical groups are active within the Episcopal Church USA, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Disciples of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the United Methodist Church, among others. Most have very large mailing lists and fervent supporters. Some, like the Confessing Movement among United Methodists and the Confessing Church Movement in the PCUSA, have grown very quickly. Almost all of these groups have dedicated and articulate leadership, informative newsletters and magazines, and very active web sites. But they are losing.

Hamilton and McKinney admit that on issues like homosexuality, “the renewal movements have succeeded only in fighting normalization to a rancorous draw.” The mainline churches are all on record in support of abortion. All are moving toward the acceptance of homosexuality. The formation of “study committees” may delay divisive votes for now, but not for long.

It is true that the groups have had some limited victories. Presbyterian evangelicals convinced the PCUSA General Assembly to declare that goddess worship (as in the infamous “Reimagining God Conference) is unbiblical. But the organizers of the conference remain in positions of influence. Liberals are solidly in control of the bureaucratic machinery of the denominations, have free reign in their seminaries, and consider the evangelical groups a nuisance. Christianity Today quotes Methodist theologian Richard Steele, who admits: “It’s hard to imagine any theological position that would get you convicted of heresy in the United Methodist Church—except, perhaps, for teaching that heresy deserves to be a chargeable offense.”

Indeed, United Methodist Bishop Joseph Sprague recently denied the virgin birth of Jesus, the bodily resurrection, and supernatural miracles. Evangelicals made absolutely no headway in pressing charges of heresy. In the worldview of the liberal bureaucrats of mainline Protestantism, heresy doesn’t even exist. The only problem children in the church are those noisy evangelicals.

So why can the article promise that evangelicals are poised for eventual victory? The authors point to sociological studies indicating rising levels of congregational involvement in parachurch ministries such as Youth for Christ and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. On the other hand, the sociologists suggest that the numerical decline of the mainline churches may leave the evangelicals with more influence. “Even if all else fails,” the article argues, “the renewal insurgents may simply outlive the liberals.” That’s hardly a platform for a “resurgence.”

I hate to throw cold water on this flickering flame, but it does seem that the Christianity Today article is more about hope than reality. No mainline denomination appears in any fashion to be returning to confessional fidelity, theological orthodoxy, or moral sanity. There is no joy in this analysis, only grief. A concerned Christian can have nothing but sympathy for brothers and sisters in Christ whose churches and denominations have been ravaged by liberal theology and hijacked by radical causes. We should fervently pray that the renewal movements will indeed gain the influence and power necessary to reform and revive these historic denominations.

But hope is not a strategy, and it does no good to substitute a “rosy scenario” for today’s tragic reality. The Episcopal House of Bishops’ lopsided vote to elect a declared and active homosexual as a bishop of the church is an unmitigated disaster. Are the mainline denominations turning around? If the current trend is victory, I shudder to imagine what defeat would look like.

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