

Renewal in Mainline Churches

Evangelicalism within the mainline American denominations is not dead. One of the surprising phenomena in recent American history is the resurgence of an evangelical presence in church where orthodoxy was abandoned long ago.

In *Evangelical Renewal*, a new book edited by Ronald Nash, eight denominational leaders or informed observers discuss renewal movements in the United Methodist Church, The United Presbyterian Church, the Episcopalian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, the American Baptist Churches, the largest Lutheran denominations, and the Roman Catholic Church. I wonder why the Roman Catholic Church is included. Though this church is going through traumatic times and upheaval, its theological stance has not altered. The anathema pronounced on the Protestants by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) has never been recanted. Abundant evidence demonstrates renewed devotion to Mariology among conservatives and charismatics.

Moral Erosion

The renewal movements of today are unexpected and exciting. Whoever thought that moribund churches could recapture the wind of the Spirit in their sails? America is going through a new wave of de-Christianization more powerful than any since the 1920s. The family is losing its honored place in American culture; the sexual revolution has gone into a radical phase; churches are debating the ordination of practicing homosexuals. The secular feminists are making their presence felt. Self-ism is blatant. Society's values have become more and more hostile to the Gospel.

Doctrinal Erosion

What led to the tragic decline of the mainline churches? Theological confusion and outright unfaithfulness to the Scriptures and the historic creeds have been major contributors to the current upheaval. During the years 1895-1930, writes James Heidinger II of the United Methodist Church, the Methodist theologians and teachers drank deeply from the spring of Social Darwinism. They were enamored by the emerging Social Gospel. But while zeal for social ministry blossomed, concern for theological matters withered. In the process of time the Methodist seminaries drifted far from their evangelical moorings. Recently some United Methodist students complained that their grades had suffered because of their evangelical views. Waldo J. Werning of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana writes about the doctrinal deviance among many leaders of the Lutheran bodies, including their theologians and Bible professors, to say nothing of many of their pastors. He claims that many Lutheran seminary professors have capitulated to the views of such German Lutherans as Rudolf Bultmann. He says that they reject the inspiration, infallibility, and the authority of the Scriptures; They deny the historical accuracy of the biblical picture of Jesus and they ridicule such

essential tenets of historic Christianity as the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, the Incarnation and the resurrection of Christ. For many Lutheran leaders today, the proclamation of the gospel is replaced by a liberal social agenda that includes the defense of abortion-on-demand and homosexuality. A growing number of Lutheran leaders accept the universalist belief that all human beings will be saved.

With such theological confusion abounding, no wonder that mainline churches lost their zeal for missions. Between 1976 and 1983 the total number of United Methodist missionaries serving full-time overseas had declined to under 500 from a high of over 1,500 just 20 years earlier. The liberals were committing spiritual suicide. Yet they did not see the handwriting on the wall. They still believed that their agenda would save the church and eventually the nation. But they left in their wake many church members confused and uncertain about the basics of the Gospel.

Divisions

The liberal agenda has not been well received by the grass-root membership. In many denominations there is a sharp division between the bureaucracy on top and the people in the pew. The leaders are far ahead of the flock, so far that many lost sight of their sheep. The reaction to the liberal trends has been varied. Many members voted with their feet. The United Methodists lost 1.8 million members in the last two decades. The Sunday Schools lost 2.1 million members during the same period. Others don't want to know about the problems in their churches. They prefer not to hear the reason for the drastic decline in membership. James Heidinger II comments: "And this is understandable. People want to believe in their church and the rightness of what it is doing."

But a rapidly growing minority is strongly protesting the liberal agenda. Interestingly, the protesters are called divisive, narrow and intolerant. The liberals, who taught church members to demonstrate against apartheid, Vietnam and Nicaragua cannot tolerate opposition to their own favorite causes. The people who led the church down the garden path of liberalism, who are the root cause of the divisions within the churches, call those who want to return to the Scriptures, - troublemakers . How ironic! Concerned members in other denominations don't find a warm reception either from their established leadership.

A Desire to Stay

The concerned don't want to leave their denominations. They have a dogged desire to stay where they are. They believe that there are no winners in divisions. The body of Christ is divided enough already. They pray, work and long for a spiritual renewal within the existing churches. They know that the road is paved with uncertainties. Renewal leaders warn all involved in the struggle not to succumb to bitterness or cynicism.

What is this longed for renewal; a renewal only God can bring? Those who are eager for renewal don't call for a return to rigid traditionalism. They don't confuse the traditions of men with the Gospel. Says Nash:

"This spiritual renewal will focus on conversion, on living the Christian life, on worship, and on evangelism. Evangelical renewal can hardly be present in a theological orthodox Church that fails to challenge its people to experience God's saving grace, that ignores the proper place of worship and study of God's Word, and that fails to exhibit God's power in the lives of its people. "

Renewal should be a continued spiritual experience. Through renewal you are brought back to a full dynamic commitment to God. Renewal exalts the Scriptures, fervently believes its inerrancy. The crucified, risen and ascended is proclaimed. His Kingship is recognized.

Get Involved

The authors urge the concerned to become active in their denominations. Renewal movements are not schismatic, as so many tend to believe. They provide an alternative to withdrawal from their denominations. They give a spiritual shelter. The contributors to Evangelical Renewal all warn against sectarianism. Reformed Christians should take this warning to heart. Evangelicals are urged to develop a long range strategy, work on positive ministries, search the Scriptures, do their homework on the issues of our time. Furthermore, they must be orthodox not only in their doctrine, but also in their practice. They must respect and love one another, be patient and considerate.

Evangelical Renewal is informative. Concerned members in all churches will be encouraged by it. The editor, Dr. Ronald H. Nash is Professor at Western Kentucky University. He is presently a Fellow of the Christianity Today Institute.

Johan D. Tangelder
June, 1988

Evangelical Renewal in the Mainline Churches, Ronald H. Nash, editor; Crossway Books, Westchester, Illinois, 1987. Softcover, 174 pages.