

God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America

by E. Brooks Holifield.

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Reviewed by Johan D. Tangelder.

E. Brooks Holifield, Professor of American Church at Emory University School of Theology, narrates the history of the men and women ordained by their churches to provide distinctive leadership. He traces their stories from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, analysing the changes in practice and authority that have transformed their vocation. For the first 150 years of the colonial period, they had significant authority both in villages and towns, and in the broader realms of authorship, education, and institutional leadership. But in time, clerical authority in America assumed multiple forms and underwent continual change. Holifield describes how authority looked and felt different in a colonial mission, in an urban eighteenth-century congregation, in nineteenth-century revival meetings, and in a twentieth-century inner-city church.

Many argue that the history of the American clergy is a story about the decline of authority in the face of irresistible secularization. Holifield observes that the narrative of decline captures some truths about the fate of the American clergy in the past four hundred years. Priests and ministers no longer have control over education, a voice in government, or the moral monopoly that they appeared to exercise in seventeenth-century Puritan New England. Newspapers no longer print their Sunday sermons. The dwindling number of Catholic churches and the membership losses in mainline Protestantism have intensified the sense that clergy do not have the authority they once did. But some fear that "biblical literalism" and an apocalyptic theology have led a powerful group of clerics to promote policies that diminish support for "a wise foreign policy," undermine a proper appreciation of science in American schools, and impose their values on every American. Holifield also states that a suspicion of specialized clerical education has continued to permeate numerous denominations. While some call for higher levels of clerical education and the pursuit of professional stands, other ministers accuse them of substituting human learning for the power of the Spirit and the wisdom of the world "for the foolishness of God." By 1969, mainline Protestants acknowledged that their ministry was "passing through a personal uncertainty." Ministers differ profoundly about Christian doctrines. They disagree about the authority of Scripture, the meaning of divine judgment and hell, and the physical resurrection of Christ. The changing face of the ministry is seen in the church demographics. The 1970s saw mainline losses but evangelical gains. While mainline Protestants suffered membership losses, the Roman Catholic Church gained members but lost priests. By the 1980s more than 60 percent of Catholics rarely or never went to confession. But the younger traditionalists of the 1990s made a concerted effort to restore older practices. According to the 2000 census, 14 percent of all American clergy in Protestantism were women. It took them longer than men to find a pulpit. And clergy spent less time with children than they once had. Catechizing no longer occupied much of the Protestant minister's time.

God's Ambassadors is a good read for pastors. It offers more than statistics and historical narrations. It tells the stories of hardships, sacrifices made, theological conflicts, and clerical worries about ineffectiveness, vocational weakness, declining cultural status, powerlessness, and failings of one kind or another.