

Turning Around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements are Changing the Church
by Thomas C. Oden. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Mich. 2006
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The scandal of the twenty-first century church is its disunity. Everything the New Testament says about the people of God takes it for granted that it is one body. Christ has one body, not many, one bride, not a plurality of them. Is there in this broken world with its broken churches a church to which we can belong? If so, where is it to be found? What are its marks? A Chinese friend, who became a Christian in Canada, asked me if I could explain in five minutes why there are so many different churches. He was totally bewildered by all the different denominations. It took me longer than five minutes to tell the story.

How do we define the Church over against the pagan world? What is the church? For many, the denomination has become the model by which they think of the Church, and yet how recent a thing a denomination is. The church has felt the impact of postmodern individualism, consumerism, a loss of sense of community and commitment. Today people are offered a variety of churches from which they can take their choice. Church hoppers can choose between mega churches, community churches, house churches. For them the churches are clubs for the like-minded, depending on musical taste, programs offered, etc.

I told my Chinese friend about the conflicting doctrines of the church. But I also mentioned to him about the devastating affect of theological liberalism. The maxim that "he who marries the spirit of the age will soon be a widower" comes to mind upon reading about the rapid decline in membership of the American and Canadian mainline churches. Having abandoned Scripture they have nothing significant to say to a postmodern world. In *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), H. Richard Niebuhr famously summarized the "gospel" of Protestant liberalism: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." This is how Thomas C. Oden also views the preaching and teaching of liberal Protestant churches. He tells how North American mainline churches are locked into political agendas mandated neither by Scripture nor by ecumenical tradition. "They have thrown themselves into partisan or utopian crusades – pro-abortion politics, radical feminism, coercive state regulatory practices, desperate and frustrated anti-globalization activism, statist dependency politics, class warfare rhetoric, unscientific visions of environmentalism, and permissive sexual liberation." Oden comments that these supposedly "prophetic" church leaders alienated believers, undermined structures of openness and accountability, lost financial support, and rendered their own ministries ineffective. For example, Oden remarks that the United Church of Canada is not imploding; it has already imploded. It is increasingly powerless to exercise discipline or authority within its own congregations. It is in deep financial trouble. Its membership losses are incredible. It has lost nearly half of its members since 1961. The Episcopalians lost many members since their 2003 decision to ordain Vicki Gene Robinson as a bishop of New Hampshire, a man who had left his wife and family to set

up house with his homosexual lover.

Oden's critique of liberal ecumenism is blistering. He observes that no movement in post-Reformation Christianity has been more divisive than the modern ecumenical movement because it distanced itself from the truth of the ancient ecumenical teaching. Some within the movement even insist that heresy must be taken seriously. Oden argues that it is fixated on manipulating and managing revolutionary pretenses. It is drawn to the heirs of Marx, Freud, Darwin, and Nietzsche. And its political activism has alienated its own worshipping communities. It has so focussed on *visible* unity that it has lost sight of the *hidden* unity of faith that Christ is creating through the Spirit. Church unity is reduced to organizational negotiations between complex institutions attempting to meld with each other.

How can church unity be achieved? The unity of believers can only come on the truth based on the unique saving action of God in Jesus Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the consequent call to the holy life. Who are the real schismatics? Those who demean classic Christian teaching are the real schismatics, not the confessors of traditional faith in Jesus.

Today's mainline Protestant denominations seem as theologically liberal as ever. What should confessing Christians do? Stay or leave? In *Turning Around the Mainline*, Oden tells how confessing Christians attempt to recover doctrinal integrity and to bring classic Christian teaching firmly back into mainline church leadership. They seek to unite reforming voices within historic Christian communions through founding confessional evangelical renewal movements. Their reform efforts are focussed especially on those mainline Protestant churches where the problems are the most outrageous. Oden lists eight mainline traditions: United Church of Canada, Episcopalian (ECUSA), Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian (PCUSA), United Methodist, American Baptist, United Church of Christ, and Disciples of Christ. He carefully chronicles the roots and history of these grassroots confessional movements. He lays out the current issues and major themes of each movement and addresses the concerns many confessing churches are facing today: what property rights they have in disputes with their denominations. But the renewal movements often meet opposition within their own denominations. For example, in the United Church of Canada there are four major renewal movements. Although the United Church's growing congregations are almost all evangelical, they are often treated as pariahs within the denominational offices. One of the renewals' most attractive and informative publications is the *Fellowship Magazine*, which is committed to "celebrating the historic Christian faith of the United Church of Canada." It functions as an outreach ministry to the people in the pews of United Church of Canada. It is totally supported by donations.

Presbyterian for Faith, Family and Ministry, a renewal movement within the PCUSA, publishes *Theology Matters*. The contributors demonstrate their commitment to the doctrines of Reformed Christianity by contrasting them with false teachings and distorted worldviews. For example, the Mar/Apr 2006 issue charges that mainline Protestantism is functionally Unitarian rather than Trinitarian in its understanding and

practice of worship. It also observes, "The long-standing debate over so-called inclusive language for God is indicative precisely of controversy concerning the core of what it is that Christians confess regarding God."

Thomas C. Oden, an executive editor of *Christianity Today*, the author of many books, and the general editor of the *Ancient Commentary on Scripture* series, firmly believes that evangelical Christians should stay with their liberal denominations. Although he is well aware that it requires faith and courage, he says, "Believing Christians require spine if they are to revive mainline churches that lack discipline. Many orthodox Christians in unorthodox church bodies indeed are demonstrating that they do have spine in these difficult times." But not every evangelical believes that staying in a liberal church is an option. I am referring to R.R. Reno, who argued, *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in An Age of Diminished Christianity* (2002), that disenchanted Episcopalians should stay put in the ruins of their denomination. But in 2005 he offered an explanation in *First Things* why he changed his mind and joined the Roman Catholic Church. No wonder the church scene in North America appears so confusing to new Christians from overseas. After my attempt to explain why there are so many denominations, my Chinese friend decided to join a local Chinese congregation.

Oden's book offers a wealth of information on renewal groups, their confessions, and their publications. It is an indispensable source for all who want to be up-to-date on the struggles and trials of evangelicals who have not given up on their denominations and seek to reform them from within.

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