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The Fortunes of American Protestantism

In retrospect, the modern era from a religious perspective has been very much about how to maintain the time-honored place and relevance of the Christian faith in a world that changed with the rise of science and philosophy (natural revelation). If there is a place for religion that denigrates the thought of human dependence and perversion, the need of a redeemer other than technology, what must the new face of that faith look like? From the perspective of western cultural values, Christianity in whatever form it may disguise itself has failed. The respect and appreciation for the Bible, characteristic of the medieval and Reformation eras, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, is past. The divisions within Christianity in the twentieth century now appear to have been intramural squabbles. All parties lost the very thing they sought to sustain in combating each other, an exalted place for religion in postmodern social values.

American Protestant Liberalism

The American liberal movement, the New Theology, was an attempt by progressive churchmen to preserve the faith by meeting the challenges of modernism with change. Unfortunately, the cost of sustaining the popularity of religion was the paring away of traditional theological content. The movement has gone through three discernible epochs in North America: the era of emergence (1880–1930), the era of triumph (1930–1960), and the era of disintegration (1960–present).

In a world of rapid new discoveries and inventions, traditional

interpretations of the Bible appeared so embarrassing that Christianity was threatened, at least in the view of some. The solution was to adopt a view of the Bible articulated by the German Ritschlian scholars, a Bible within the Bible. Objectionable parts (such as a six-day creation, a Noahic flood, the imprecatory Psalms, the great whale story of Jonah, the seeming sanction of slavery and polygamy) could simply be labeled as error. The “tail” that wagged the theological “dog” was science, which was confused with common sense. Jesus was still central in the new faith, but He was seen as the flower of humanity and not as God in the flesh. He became a wonderful example of moral virtue and self-sacrifice. The content of the Bible, consistent with that picture of Him, was the “real Bible” and the rest was myth. Shailer Mathews (1863–1941), professor at the University of Chicago, defined the movement as an “undertaking to adjust Christianity to modern needs by changing the emphasis in its message” (*Faith of a Modernist* [1925], 22).

The liberal movement in Protestant theology gained access to important teaching positions in the northern denominational seminaries (e.g., Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian) in the early decades of the twentieth century as well as prominent posts in denominational hierarchies. By the 1920s the new emphases were evident in the churches. Differences led to conflict and conflict to the triumph of liberalism. The clash of divergent factions within the great denominations ended as the Great Depression strangled the nation. For many traditionalists, the losses had eschatological portent; surely the end of all things was near. One thing was as blatant as H. L. Mencken’s ridicule of conservatives as anti-intellectual country bumpkins: traditional concepts of religious value were gone, perhaps forever, from mainstream America.

In the era of the triumph of liberalism on the North American scene, in the

decades following the First World War, voices emerged arguing that liberalism needed a mid-course change. The components of inevitable progress and human improvability seemed shattered by the Great War. In one of the most important sermons of the era, "The Church Must Go Beyond Liberalism" (1935), Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969), a prominent New York pastor and national radio voice, called for a "new liberalism" that would challenge the prevailing secular culture.

The refacing of liberalism, dubbed "neo-liberalism," would dominate theology from the 1930s to the 1960s. Borrowing interpretative insights from the broad neo-orthodox movement, neo-liberal scholars rejected the overemphasis in the nineteenth century on the immanence of God, an overly optimistic view of human nature, and the notion of inevitable progress. Some, such as Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), pastor and seminary professor, found the Puritan Jonathan Edwards insightful. For Niebuhr, the social problems of the day could not be solved by the rigorous application of reason alone; it required political solutions. Crafted by Walter Marshall Horton (1895–1965) of Oberlin College, John C. Bennett (1902–1994), and H. P. Van Dusen (1897–1975) of Union Seminary, New York, a theology emerged for the churches devoid of the bubbly optimism of old liberal rhetoric, as well as the harsh criticism of conservatives as a group of psychological misfits who cling to a forever-gone past because they fear change.

Sometimes called "Realistic Theology" because it seemed to take the Bible more seriously and spoke of it more respectfully, it remained very much characterized by old assumptions in a new dress. Jesus Christ was more like God than humankind, but He remained outside the pale of true deity. Advocates rejected the notion of a salvation through science, but sin remained moral selfishness and salvation societal harmony.

In the radical 1960s, the decade of enormous societal unrest, liberalism began to fracture as a movement. It no longer possessed a cohesive set of values and it disintegrated into competing factions and fad theologies. The more radical insights of Bultmann seemed to influence theologians in the movement more than the conserving influence of Barth.

Various forms of liberation or empowerment theologies emerged such as Black Theology, Feminist Theology, God-Is-Dead Theology, and Theology of the Poor. Each used the Bible, but did so in a manner that saw within it their own message and neglected other vast portions. The theological method adopted in these theologies, though rarely in their conclusions, was Rudolph Bultmann's.

Among other expressions of the fracturing liberal movement were a rash of short-lived, momentarily popular attempts to separate the essential message of the Bible from the Bible. Examples of these were Teilhard de Chardin's Theology of Evolution and Wilhelm Moltmann's Theology of Hope. What was seemingly always missing was the centrality of the incarnate Christ, the utter hopelessness of a sinful race, and the great propitiatory event of Calvary, long with hope of a heaven beyond the exigencies of this life. What the Bible set forth as its essential message they missed; what they emphasized missed the major point. In effect, in the recent liberal tradition there are many "Bibles."

Two popular examples of the disintegration of liberalism, though they have now lost their mystique, is Paul Tillich's Theology of Being in the 1960s and Process Theology in the 1980s and 1990s. Tillich's (1886–1965) conclusions were reminiscent of Ludwig Fierbach of the previous century. Theology was reduced to psychological symbolism. God is not real; he is a symbol of human ultimate concerns and needs, as is the human invention of the Trinity. Jesus Christ is only a God-intoxicated man, a psychologically whole person.

Process Theology reflected the huge shift in epistemology as the modern era faded into postmodernism. Unlike theologies before it, rooted in Newtonian science, Process Theology is rooted in Hiesenberg, Planck, and Einstein's world of indeterminacy, relativity, and Quantum physics. Applied to religion, there is indeterminacy in God. God is gaining understanding as the future evolves into the present. This understanding of God, it is argued, is more comforting to people because God truly identifies with human weaknesses and ignorance.

Liberalism is a movement that has lost its way. It lacks a uniform core of affirmations, a concise goal, and a clear means for obtaining it.

American Protestant Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism shares much the same experience as its counterpart, American liberalism. The two are deeply intertwined seeking the same end, the preservation of a vital form of Christian faith. Both have recently shown evidence of stumbling. The history of evangelicalism can be divided into four periods: a period of emergence (1880–1910), a period of conflict (1910–1930), a period of resurgence (1930–1980), and a period of fracturing (1980–present). In retrospect, it is now evident that the movement was rooted in nineteenth-century revivalism and the Common Sense tradition, catapulted into existence by its resistance to liberalism, and expressed in transdenominational alliances and paraecclesiastical mission organizations.

Tensions within American denominational Christianity began to surface in the 1880s. New England Congregationalism seems to have been the first to struggle over appropriate accommodation to the rise of the sciences and the general mood of buoyant optimism and self-sufficiency that gripped the nation, most particularly their effect upon the way the Bible should be understood.

Fractures could be detected in the foundation stones of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches as well.

In the post–world war era of the twenties, the denominational fissures became a chasm of open conflict. In essence what was at stake was the direction of the great, large denominational bodies. Liberals were convinced that theological change and cultural accommodation would keep Christianity a viable, relevant force in the nation. Conservatives, sometimes called fundamentalists or evangelicals (the terms being synonymous at this early stage), were horrified at the implication of Christianity devoid of historic orthodox doctrine. In the mind of J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), the Presbyterian scholar, whatever one would call the liberal tradition, it should not be thought of as Christian. As the nation tumbled under the shock of the stock market crash of 1929 and struggled with the implications of the Great Depression, one thing became clear: the liberal element in the northern mainline bodies had gained control of the denominational hierarchies, publication societies, mission boards, and educational centers. The situation was as bleak as the plight of the farmer in the Great Dust Bowl who left all for the orange groves of southern California and a new life.

The evangelical/fundamentalist/conservative element faced another crisis. Having lost the struggle with liberalism denominationally, what were they to do? Though many stayed within the mainline churches to participate as laity or serve as leaders, others felt the need for more strictly conservative churches. The result was that in the 1930s and 1940s, many small denominational splinter groups were established (Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, et al.), as well as were a host of independent churches, often called community, Bible, or fellowship churches. With them came new publication societies, mission boards, and

educational institutions.

Though many new groups formed at this time, they were quite small. This presented a problem in outreach; further, the liberal movement had a collective organization, the Federal Council of Churches (now National Council of Churches), which claimed to be the voice of Christianity in America. Recognizing the need for cooperative unity several umbrella agencies were formed. The most prolific of these was the National Association of Evangelicals (1942). Evangelicals began to experience a renaissance of fortunes in America, though the collective expression of its vitality was often not in the churches, but in the proliferation of paraecclesiastical agencies, whether educational institutions or evangelistic organizations.

As the 1930s faded into the 40s and 50s, a second generation of leaders emerged that envisioned an even brighter day. The dream was to put a new, positive face on the movement that would challenge the liberal movement's hegemony and give the nation both a biblically accurate and culturally concerned Christianity. The intellectual statesman behind it was Carl F. H. Henry (1913–2003), whose *Uneasy Conscience of a Modern Fundamentalism* (1947) was the movement's catalyst. Billy Graham (b. 1918) was the most prominent public figure, *Christianity Today* (1956) the literary voice, and Fuller Theological Seminary (1947) its educational citadel. The glue of the movement resided in a simple creed that affirmed the basic conservative affirmations of historic Christianity while minimizing the importance of denominational distinctives and the community of the fellowship of individual churches. It was the triumph of the nineteenth-century revivalist spirit and the paraecclesiastical enterprise.

The rhetoric of the movement was frequently as critical as it was naively optimistic. As a result of the positions its advocates affirmed, it caused division

in the ranks. What was argued was that the conservative, fundamentalist, evangelical movement had been a very loose coalition whose unity resided in a mutual hostility to liberalism. The triumph of liberalism, as well as the reciprocal criticisms of the demeanor and policies of some in the coalition, destroyed it. Terms once viewed as synonymous, fundamentalist and evangelical became parties that were mutually hostile, and philosophically and culturally divergent.

Time magazine recognized the resurgence of evangelicalism, announcing 1976 as the “Year of the Evangelical.” However, the movement had already begun to fracture with an in-house controversy over the integrity of the Bible and the creation of the Council on Biblical Inerrancy. In some ways evangelicalism found itself where American Christianity was in the 1890s—divided over how the Bible was to be read, pillaged by the issues of Feminist Theology, and even doubt of traditional conceptions of the doctrine of God and theism. The term *evangelicalism* has lost, if it ever possessed it, a recognizable identity.

Since the theory of an evangelical unity through an emphasis on a few important essentials seems to have failed, the “movement” has devolved into a labyrinth of competing theories of sacred renewalism. Some see little hope for Christianity’s renaissance without a “new reformation.” In this view, the church’s primary problem is that it has imbibed the mores and values of the culture while losing its historic orthodox message.

Others believe that the hope of rebirth is in cultural accommodation and a “seeker friendly” philosophy of ministry that remains Christian, but is not “limited” by traditional styles of worship and symbolism. For some, the allegorical “Rosetta Stone” is to return to primitive patterns of doing church evident in the second and third centuries. A reaction to the megachurch movement, the Emergent Church movement seeks to return to church smallness,

discipleship and discipline, and community consciousness. For others the quest for rootedness has led them to the Protestant liturgical churches (i.e., Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian). Others have entered the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities. Cultural Christianity, in this case the noisy, often shallow individualism of the American spirit (i.e., evangelicalism) has become a bit too much for many.

Another solution, a rather novel one to say the least, is to return to the Christian world before the emergence of the paraecclesiastical model of ministry. That means placing the locus of Christian identity in the local church or denomination where a more holistic expression of biblical understanding and a particular heritage can be extolled. The way to effect cultural change, according to this theory, is not a grand series of meetings, an emphasis of cultlike personalities, or cultural compromise. With doctrinal integrity to combat theological reductionism, with emphasis on the pastoral role, and with the dynamic of the community of the saints coupled with societal awareness and concern, renewal of the church—if not of the whole of society—may come.

American Protestant Mainline Denominationalism

In recent decades the mainline churches have experienced growing cultural disinterest in Christianity (arguably the result of the loss of doctrinal integrity). The more liberal the denominational policies of a group, the greater the numerical decline. For example, the American Baptist Church, USA (northern Baptists), between 1990 and 2003 had a drop in membership of over 106,000 (6.8%); the Episcopal Church lost over 12,000 (4.9%); and the United Methodist Church lost over 757,000 (8.3%). Some denominations recorded double-digit decline: the Disciples of Christ (189,000 or 26.7%); the Presbyterian Church, USA

(435,000 or 14.8%); and the United Church of Christ (285,000 or 17%).

What is somewhat ironic is that denominational decline has occurred on not a few occasions in spite of major ecclesiastical mergers that brought together larger groups under a single title. In 1968, the United Methodist Church came into existence in the merger of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren. The Congregational Church of New England experienced two mergers in the last century, the latest (1957) with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to become the United Church of Christ. In 1982 the Northern and Southern Presbyterian communities merged to become the Presbyterian Church USA.

Since World War II three denominational bodies have experienced turmoil over theology. Beginning in the 1940s, the Presbyterian Church South (the PCUS) began a struggle that ended in schism in 1972. A conservative splinter group was formed, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the southern and northern bodies merged in 1982 to form the PCUSA.

In the 1960s and 1970s, theological turmoil gripped the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, focused on discontent at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis. After years of difficulties and the founding of the more latitudinal Seminix (1974), Seminary in Exile, the denomination experienced schism with the establishment of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) in 1976. In 1988 three progressive Lutheran bodies—the AELC, the American Lutheran Church, and the Lutheran Church in America—merged to become the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America.

Controversy troubled the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in America, in the 1970s and 1980s. Fearing a progressive takeover, conservatives (fundamentalists) waged a political struggle to regain control of the denomination's boards. At the convention level, as well as within

the seminaries, conservatives have been successful in reestablishing hegemony; at the state level they have not. Signs of progressive discouragement with the direction of the convention have been the withholding of money from denominational causes (thus limiting their voting power at the convention level), the creation of a rival educational institution, and the threat of creating a new denomination. The SBC is one of the very rare examples in history where liberal threats have been throttled and conservatism sustained.