

The Remnant Spirit

Conservative Reform in Mainline Protestantism

Douglas E. Cowan

Foreword by Irving R. Hexham

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut

Contents

Foreword *by Irving R. Hexham*

Acknowledgments

Part I

1. Conservative Reform and Renewal: An Introduction to the Precipice
2. Precipitous Moments: The Platform of Reform and Renewal
3. Precipice and Response: The Three Drifts of Reform and Renewal

Part II

4. Irreconcilable Differences: The Presbyterian Church (USA)
5. A Voice for Repentance: The United Methodist Church
6. *Dissensus Fidelium*: The Anglican Communion in North America
7. Defending Orthodoxy in the Great White North: The United Church of Canada

Part III

8. Structuring Dissent: Organizational Dimensions of Reform and Renewal
9. Dissent as Identity: Reform and Renewal Teleology

References

Index

Reform and Renewal in the Mainline Church: An Introduction to the Precipice

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about church fights, fights the combatants believe will shape the future of their respective denominations, fights that affect not only the large, often unwieldy religious institutions within which they take place, but individual families as well. Church conflict, of course, is nothing new. In fact, the history of the Christian church is arguably the history of the different ways in which devout men and women have understood the nature of their relationship with God, how they have argued about the relative merits of those different understandings, and how they have resolved—or failed to resolve—the tensions inherent in the disputes. From the Council at Jerusalem where Paul argued that Gentiles could not be excluded from Jesus’ vision of the commonwealth of God to the Ecumenical Councils of the Church which gradually decreed that only those who believed according to the tenets of Athanasian theology could be included, from the *filioque* split of the great Eastern and Western Churches to congregational splits at First Baptist, Grace Methodist, or St. Andrew’s Presbyterian, Christianity has been caught for most of its history in the ebb and flow of schism and reunion, of conflict, debate, and reconciliation.

More specifically, though, this book is about some of the church fights that have taken place since the end of World War Two in what is known colloquially as mainline North American Protestantism. While both Robert Wuthnow (1988, 1989) and James Davison Hunter (1991) have examined the larger arena of “religious liberals” versus “religious conservatives” in, as Hunter puts it, “the struggle to define America,” for the most part their analyses have considered broader interdenominational conflicts—evangelical Protestants versus mainline Protestants, for example. In this book, I would like to take their discussion to the intradenominational level, for the larger battles which they so aptly describe are being played out in very similar ways on these much smaller

fields. These are the struggles to define, in the United States: the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Episcopal Church; and in Canada, the United Church.

Sometimes, at both the congregational and denominational levels, the conflict revolves around a particular event in the life of a church: the publication of a new hymn book, a new prayer book, a new church school curriculum. Those opposed to these new resources contest what they often regard as skewed visions of the faith, visions largely unauthorized by the constituencies on which they have been allegedly foisted. For example, in order to bring his congregation in line with something called “Inclusive Language,” a young minister has developed the annoying habit of announcing changes to the lyrics of favorite hymns. “He” becomes “they,” “Father becomes “Creator”—both regardless of their effect on the poetics or the theology of the piece. Likewise, treasured prayers are rewritten, ostensibly to reflect new (and by implication “better”) understandings of the faith. Or, just a week after the annual church school Christmas pageant, a guest preacher from the local seminary tells the same congregation that no thinking Christian has believed in a literal Virgin Birth for more than a century. More than a few are caught off guard by these comments, and grumble angrily in their pews. These are common examples of instances when the pace at which theology and doctrine evolve in the church collides with the cherished beliefs of those who populate (and, as is so often pointed out in the ensuing arguments, pay for) its sanctuaries.

Other times, though, church members interpret these particular events more as warning signs, as symptoms of much larger, more deeply-rooted systemic problems. Rather than a mere Sunday morning irritant, traditionalists contend that the introduction of inclusive language represents a decisive shift in basic theological positioning. Rewritten prayers are regarded as attempts to change the very nature of God, rather than simply the dominant metaphors for God. Liturgical experimentation, such as altering the established baptismal formula of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” to something like “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,” raises concerns that such practices will place the denomination outside the pale of legitimate ecumenical participation. And, finally, to take one of the most trenchant of recent examples, proposed changes in ordination standards that would permit gay men and lesbians to serve in the Church openly and honestly are regarded by denominational conservatives as part of an ongoing attack on the authority of the Bible, an abandonment of “traditional” or “historic” Christian mores, and the perpetuation of a pattern of hegemonic governance that has increasingly alienated denominational authorities from their grassroots constituencies.

In the midst of these debates, congregations split, and it is not uncommon for family members to come down on different sides of the conflict. Clergy protest their billet assignments at denominational conferences, proclaiming indignantly that they will not share a room with one of “those”—whoever “those” are. Indeed, in the wake of significant denominational conflict over such issues as inclusive language or homosexual ordination, especially when it has been reported in (and often aggravated by) mass media, more than one mainline clergyperson has been asked to yield his or her seat at the local ministerial group. At this end of the conflict continuum, disputants often believe that the very nature of their identity as Christians is at stake.

These issues are among many which have been regarded by traditionalists as clear signs of the need for *reform* in the mainline Protestant denominations. Many consider them evidence that clerical freedom of speech has been effectively rescinded, that ministers are no longer permitted to preach as their hearts direct, but must adhere to some politically correct “party line.” Most often, issues such as the revision of theology and liturgy, the use of inclusive language, denominational support for various kinds of social action, and the ongoing debate over homosexuality in the church are among the reasons traditionalists give to explain the drastic decline in mainline membership, participation, and financial commitment since the late 1960s. That there are other reasons for this decline does not go entirely unnoticed by denominational conservatives, but that the effects of these issues remain in the eyes of conservatives largely unacknowledged by denominational elites only increases the alienation felt by those who disagree with changes in church doctrine, polity, and practice. The well-known gospel chorus, “Gimme that old time religion,” may not be heard often in the sanctuaries of mainline Protestant churches, but the desire to recover that religion, which traditionalists regard as a more authentic and legitimate Christianity, is what motivates conservative reform and renewal movements.

Their fight is to see the Christian Church returned to the state of grace for which they believe God created it, and from which they insist it has fallen. And, in this fight they contend that they manifest the remnant spirit of faithful resistance.