

Voices: Should Christianity change to stay relevant?

January 11, 2017

An article at the *Washington Post* by Wilfrid Laurier University professor David Haskall, “[Liberal churches are dying. But conservative churches are thriving](#),” has been turning heads lately.



Jake RaabeThe article details a Canadian study of 22 Mainline Protestant churches in Ontario. The study asked a series of questions to determine if the churches are “conservative” or “liberal” and examined the net growth or loss in attendance over a 10-year period. Haskall concluded, “Conservative Protestant theology, with its more literal view of the Bible, is a significant predictor of church growth while liberal theology leads to decline.”

This gave me pause. The phrase “literal interpretation” has lost almost all meaning within contemporary Christian discourse, as have the phrases “conservative” and “liberal.” To find out what the author constituted a “conservative” or “liberal” church, I examined the original study he published in *Review of Religious Research*, “[Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy](#).”

Surprising criteria



The criteria he used to determine if a church is liberal or conservative surprised me. The statement “Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of my sins” indicates church is conservative, as does “God performs miracles in answer to prayer” and “It is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians.” A conservative church, by this study’s definition, seems to be a church that believes in the basic narrative of the Gospels, God’s intervention in the world, and evangelism and discipleship as important components of the Christian life.

What struck me reading the study is that these are not typically convictions I would associate with conservative theology. Belief in Jesus, an active God and evangelism seem to be basic components of the Christian faith. Contrary to what the headline implied to many readers, Young-Earth Creationism and a ban on women in leadership roles didn’t correlate with growth; basic adherence to historic Christian theological affirmations did.

“Saving” the church

In his article in the *Washington Post*, Haskall refers to John Shelby Spong’s *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* as a model for what he calls a “liberal” church. In this 1998 book, Spong, an Episcopal bishop, claims in order to remain honest and relevant to the modern world, Christianity must move beyond the traditional understanding of Christianity as expressed in the creeds to fit within the scientific and philosophic consensuses of the day. Christianity in the modern world, he claims, no longer can teach “a supernatural deity who invades the world periodically, who works through a virgin birth, a physical resuscitation and a cosmic ascension.”

Departing from the vision of Christianity expressed throughout history was supposed to save the church. Instead, we now find, those who subsumed the gospel to culture are failing, and those who proclaimed basic orthodoxy to a skeptical culture are gaining ground, regardless of which particular “brand” of Christian theology they subscribe to.

Success or failure

If the results of the study are true, then Spong was incorrect. Christianity does not need to change in order to survive in the modern world. In fact, departure from Christian orthodoxy is an assurance failure for a church.

Perhaps the title of the study should be adjusted. Conservative Christianity isn’t growing, and liberal Christianity isn’t shrinking. Churches that hold to the gospel as it has been understood throughout Christian history are growing, and churches that subsume the gospel to the movements of culture are dying.

A healthy, growing church doesn’t come out of subscribing to a particular brand of Christian theology, *but from having a theology that is Christian in the first place.*

As an active member of a church with female deacons and more members that vote donkey than elephant, I take great heart in this news. God is faithful age to age, and the gospel is a truth that, while often translated to speak to new contexts, never has to be altered or adjusted. Spong was incorrect; Christianity is doing just fine as it is.

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