

Future Challenges for Church Leaders

By Stephen E. Brimmer

The religious landscape in America is growing more complex. According to a study released by The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (Bader, et al, 2006) American religion appears monolithic on the face of it but in reality is amazingly complex and diverse. For example, a large percentage of Americans agree that God exists, but have many different opinions regarding what God is like and what He wants for the world. Closer to home for many of us, Evangelicalism in America is getting harder to pin down.

The Baylor survey reveals that:

- While nearly half of Americans (47.2%) identify themselves as “Bible-believing”, only 15 percent of the population use the term “Evangelical” to describe their religious identity and barely two in 100 Americans say it is the best description.
- Just a third of persons who participate in Evangelical churches (32.6%) refer to themselves as “Evangelical”.
- More people in Mainline Protestant denominations describe themselves best as “Evangelical” than do persons affiliated with Evangelical Protestant denominations. (Source: The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, September 2006)

Some see a meltdown of Evangelical ministries looming on the American horizon. The primary causes are growth of religious pluralism in America and the flawed strategy of Evangelical churches.

Religious Pluralism

Americans have always promoted freedom of religion over uniformity of belief and expression. We are a land of opportunity that has opened its doors to the world. Most of the more than 22 million immigrants to the USA over the past 40 years adhere to non-Christian religions (Alvis, 2006). Islamic mosques, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and meditation centers are now part of the American landscape. Diversity is valued in

American culture and with it comes a message of tolerance. This reality will create a growing challenge to traditional evangelism methods for evangelical Christians.

Strategy Failure

The ground is shifting beneath us. Some are warning Evangelicals of dire consequences should they fail to recognize and properly respond to a rapidly changing external environment. Spencer (2009) believes it is inevitable that Evangelicalism as we know it today is close to its end.

“We are on the verge – within 10 years – of a major collapse of evangelical Christianity. This breakdown will follow the deterioration of the mainline Protestant world and it will fundamentally alter the religious and cultural environment in the West.”

Spencer (2000) cites the following reasons for the approaching meltdown of Evangelicalism:

- Church leaders made the grave mistake of focusing on a *cause* (culture wars) instead of a *faith*, causing society at large to view them as an obstacle to progress
- Inability to articulate the gospel with any real coherence to today’s society
- Concentration on behaviors while failing to pass along the essentials of orthodox faith to the next generation
- Tendency to talk to themselves rather than engage in constructive dialogue with the culture
- As adherents leave Evangelical ministries, the money will dry up

The pressing question is whether Evangelicals can learn from past mistakes - and even more importantly from others they have previously been unwilling to listen to - in order to develop an effective roadmap for the future.

References:

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