

One New Book for the Preacher

Joseph S. Harvard, III

First Presbyterian Church, Durham, North Carolina

BEYOND ESTABLISHMENT: PROTESTANT IDENTITY IN A POST-PROTESTANT AGE edited by Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof. Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 1993.

The demise of mainline Protestant denominations has been a “hot” topic for discussion recently in the media and in academic circles. In a *Newsweek* article entitled “Dead End for the Mainline?” (9 Aug. 1993), Duke theologian Stanley Hauerwas suggests, “God is killing mainline Protestantism in America.”

For those of us who were born and bred in this briar patch, the obituary is disturbing to say the least. Even though our primary allegiance is to the church of Jesus Christ, we have an emotional and professional stake in what is happening to our denominations. The issue of denominational health and prosperity also relates to the context in which we preach. What does the shift reflected in the denominational crisis say about what is happening in American culture? Before you put on your funeral garb or prepare the eulogy, let me suggest that you read *Beyond Establishment*. Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof have put together a helpful book for those of us who are concerned about the health and welfare of mainline denominations. This book takes a hard and hopeful look at the role denominations can play in the postestablishment era.

The book begins with an analysis of the crisis in the introduction and ends with an epilogue which looks at future directions. The introduction and epilogue offer valuable insight to the preacher. In between there are sixteen essays about the ways mainline Protestant denominations are facing new conditions. The essays are organized in three parts. Part One looks at the way activities and support structures in local congregations encourage religious identity. Part Two investigates the role of activities and structures beyond the local congregation in supporting denominations. Part Three is a case study of how several denominations have responded to recent developments and what the responses have meant for denominational identity.

The essays on congregational activity are helpful because they look at some things we take for granted. The role of fellowship ties in developing and maintaining denominational identity is explored in a provocative way by Daniel Olson, a sociologist. Linda Clark, who teaches sacred music at Boston University School of Theology, looks at the way hymns support our faith. She focuses on a sample of United Methodist and Episcopal congregations as they respond to “Amazing Grace.” She shows how the text and time bring different meanings in different denominations. Keith Roberts draws a fascinating picture of how corporate ritual celebration in worship reinforces central values in a denomination. Corporate worship combines universal Christian symbols and particular denominational values. The strengths and weaknesses of the church school in shaping religious identity are explored.

How are denominational cultures transmitted? This is the question given the most attention in this volume. A series of articles looks at the way colleges, theological institutions, and campus ministries are approaching the task of passing on denominational identity. Gwen Kennedy Neville takes a look at Montreat, North Carolina, as an example of how summer assemblies and conference centers create and transmit

denominational culture. Her essay captures the importance of such places, but she misses the extent to which Montreat has been changed through the merger of the Presbyterian church as it has expanded from a regional center to a national site. The implications of this change are important because it increases diversity. There is also an interesting essay about the Presbyterian ordination position paper in which J. Frederick Holper discusses the tension between discipline and democratization in the Presbyterian church.

The final section is a case study of how three denominations have faced the challenge, the Reformed Church in America, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Creighton Lacy, who taught at Duke and was a Methodist missionary in China, asks the “big” question: Why not attend the funeral with gratitude and joy? The denominations have been helpful in supporting international missions, but they have outlived their usefulness and become a huge stumbling block in the communication of the gospel in non-Western culture. They argue against the unity of the body of Christ, according to Lacy. He suggests a postdenominational world church. This vision of a united church has proven extremely elusive as a reality. This does not negate the challenge to work together so that the world may believe.

The book is a rich and provocative collection of essays which I heartily recommend. They have forced me to reflect on practices and structures taken for granted. The book also offers creative suggestions to strengthen the congregational life. The editors suggest the hope for renewal will begin at the congregational level. The hope is that denominations can offer an alternative to the fundamentalists and New Age religion and offer people a place to stand which makes sense in their lives. “We believe,” write the editors, “that denominations have a continuing role to play in embodying particular expressions of the broader Christian vision in ways that enable people to locate themselves and order their lives by it while honoring their diverse experiences and cultures.” Maybe God is not through with mainline Protestant denominations yet!