

One New Book for the Preacher

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U.S. LIFESTYLES AND MAINLINE CHURCHES: A KEY TO REACHING PEOPLE IN THE 90'S, by Tex Sample. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990. \$12.95.

There is no easy way to tell what makes a book compelling to a given reader—but this one has been experienced that way by this reviewer. Maybe it is the subtle promise of the subtitle which suggests a “key” to intersecting the lives of people in the last decade of this century. Lord knows we all have finally noticed that our “mainline” churches have not been too effective at it over the last two decades. Maybe it is the depiction of our own families in the book’s delineation of baby boomers who have largely found the worship and values of mainline churches not so much offensive as boring. Maybe it is the depiction of our own congregations, in which we find not simply “our kind of people” but divergent subcultural strains often straining against one another. Any maybe it is the implied hope that unity in Christ can transcend differences of subculture and social location, not just ideally but functionally—in actual congregations.

Tex Sample has written a book which does all these things and more. It describes three major subcultural groups, though it remains content with overly bland designations of them as the Cultural Left, the Cultural Right, and the Cultural Middle. The first of these groups is characterized by Sample as having strong inner direction, coming from affluent families, and being committed to personal freedom and tolerance. Within this cultural subtype there are some more focused on personal, vital experience and others more focused on social issues such as environmental integrity, social justice, and peace. Some have strong affinities with aspects of the New Age Movement. One of the most important points Sample makes about this group is: “The people in our society who are least likely to attend church are those on the cultural left” (p. 31).

Because of their characteristics, Sample believes that reaching this cultural subgroup—the absence of whom accounts for major portions of decline among mainline churches—will require something more than business as usual. He offers a panoply of alternative worship, programmatic, and ministry initiatives which is more responsive to characteristics of the Cultural Left while still being rooted in the gospel. He also poignantly suggests that congregations may be motivated to make the changes such outreach requires as they see the faces of their own children among those on the Cultural Left. Of special interest to preachers will be his stress on the metaphor of “journey” as the most appropriate mode of theology for relating to this group. Though he does not explore the implications of this for preaching in any detail, it clearly points a direction for teaching and preaching which hopes to engage the people inhabiting this part

of the landscape of contemporary American life.

The Cultural Right is comprised of a segment of society far less oriented to career and—of necessity—far more oriented to making a living, providing for a family, and tending to the details of just getting along. One major segment of this group, the “Respectables,” constitute a major component of most mainline churches according to Sample. Despite frequent stereotyping as religiously fundamentalist and politically reactionary, they live by values of family, local neighborhood and community, and love of country—none of which are inherently inimical to new horizons of social change and social justice.

The problem, says Sample, is that most mainline ministers are educated and socialized away from an appreciation and understanding of these people and their values, failing to understand that most of the major social justice issues of the day can be focused in terms of the very value system of the Cultural Right, that is, family, neighborhood, and country. Just as “journey theology” is appropriate for the Cultural Left, Sample believes that “folk theology” which appreciates popular religion is appropriate for the Cultural Right. Because folk theology in the U.S.A. is profoundly biblical, there is a broad hint here for preachers. To speak in a compelling fashion to people on the Cultural Right, one must speak in the idiom, accent, and stories of scripture. But folk theology also “tends to deal with religious faith and with the Bible in a non-linear way that takes primarily oral expression” (p. 92). This leads to an emphasis upon story as a preferred means of communication with the Cultural Right.

The Cultural Middle is typified by its stress on career, though a tension is not infrequently experienced between career and the “good life.” A concomitant characteristic is tremendous weight (to the point of strain) on the nuclear family as career removes families regularly from kinship and relationship networks. So demanding are these careers that they frequently do not permit living out a full range of interests. In particular the spiritual hungers of the self are not infrequently set aside in the quest for success.

Congregations of the Cultural Middle have a high commitment to toleration of diversity, but maintain the tolerance by muting public issues and concentrating on the private domain of family, personal development, and personal morality. Notwithstanding a significant address to private interests, the effect is to direct attention away from the important public issues which surround everyone. With this group, the task of theology—and of preaching as primary theology—is to explore the pain of the cultural middle in the mode of what Sample calls “explanatory theology,” seeking to account for that pain in the context of a larger perspective on the human condition and human liberation.

Sample acknowledges that some congregations will specialize in ministry to one particular lifestyle. However, he believes that a far greater number will inevitably draw together greater variety and then be faced with the challenge of living and growing with that diversity. He offers a practical list of possibilities which may be taken into account. He may be dreaming. But he poses a challenge that can be ignored only at the peril of making a mockery of Christian unity beyond the cultural differences of left, right, and middle.

The fundamental purpose of this book is elusive. Sometimes it appears to be a manual for outreach to the cultural left. At other times, it presents itself as a strategy for bringing the cultural right on board with a social justice agenda. At other times, it portrays the social malaise of the cultural middle. How well all these features cohere is not entirely clear. But despite these problems, the book remains compelling simply because it offers vivid, differentiated, and appreciative profiles of very real groups of people who—despite their differences—are all around us and in our midst. Preachers need to know who may be listening!