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Brief Studies

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WHY CONSERVATIVE CHURCHES ARE GROWING. By Dean Kelley. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. 184 pages. Cloth. \$6.95.

A double paradox! That conservative churches should be growing while liberal churches are declining! Oddly, the very things liberal churches are doing in order to attract more members are having the opposite effect, and the things that conservative churches are doing in order to purify their ranks by thinning them out are causing them to grow. There is biting irony in the fact that liberal churches, in attempting to convince the disinherited of their (the churches') relevance, are not only losing the support of their stalwart members, but they are also not gaining those in whose interest they are sacrificing their strong supporters.

Another paradox: Those churches that set out deliberately to change the social order are often less effective in the long run in changing the social order than are those who renounce such this-worldly concerns and instead emphasize an other-worldly orientation to life. The Anabaptists of Europe and the Wesleyan Methodists of England wrought amazing social changes in the lives of their constituents and ultimately in their social order by being careful not to become involved in political matters. (Lyle Schaller recently advised the Lutheran mission leaders at a LCUSA-sponsored conference on New Towns held in Columbia, Maryland, to maintain an "adversary" role over against the communities in which they are located, rather than try to effect "partnership relations.")

Kelley identifies "high demand" and "strictness" as the qualities that account for church growth. In addition to the Anabaptists and the Wesleyan Methodists, he cites the examples of the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses. This conclusion of Kelley arouses the intense interest of Lutherans. Legalism is more effective in the growth of these churches than is the power of the Gospel! This is not Kelley's language, but, in effect, is the conclusion. While Anabaptists and Wesleyan Methodists can readily be acknowledged as carriers of the Gospel, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are not known as evangelical churches. It is clear that Kelley is not

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discussing the role of the Gospel, as Lutherans know it, in church growth.

Kelley goes on to say that it may be only one per hundred or one per thousand of persons that is so constituted psychologically that it is strictness rather than the thing about which one is "strict" that gives these people what they are looking for in joining a "strict" church. But this is enough to make a statistical difference in church growth. This is a phenomenon that is not new to our time. But Kelley believes it is a significant factor in church growth in our time. We Lutherans, of course, now ask: What do we do with strictness for strictness' sake? If this is a significant factor for church growth, do we then play down the Gospel of Christ and play up "strictness," reducing the critical element in faith to a kind of "strictness reductionism"?

What does an evangelical church do with such people? Must such persons be left to legalistic organizations who exploit law and order for its own sake? One possibility is that such folks are really looking for *certainty*. A church that proclaims, nurtures, and practices the Christian faith with an unyielding conviction as to its truth and meaning is filling one of the greatest of all human needs for a "godliness that is profitable unto all things, having promise for the life that now is and that which is to come." To offer strictness for this kind of certainty is to offer scorpions to those who seek bread.

Necessary Chores Versus "The One Thing Needful"

Mainline Protestant churches once filled the role among many people that is now being filled by third force churches. They once were "high demand" churches. A strange chapter in world mission history is the bureaucratization of the foreign missionaries sent out by these church bodies. The third force churches and the "sectarians" are today supplying the overseas missionaries, while the "missionary zeal" of mainliners seems to have gone, and still goes, into unifying church structures and into reforming the social order. The latter are indeed necessary chores, but when preoccupation with them becomes our "mission" and we do these at the expense of a primary task . . . then must be fulfilled the prophecy of Christ: If these

hold their peace, then must the stones cry out!

Kelley is not advocating a retreat from social concern by any means. One misreads and misinterprets him if he takes pages 134–138 out of context. Here Kelley cautions: "Religious groups should not abdicate their unique and essential contribution to healing the world's wounds: meaning." This is the church's specialty. This is different from the technological interventions of secular groups. "That does not mean that meaning should displace technological remedies—men still need food, shelter, clothing, jobs, education, medical care—or even view them as inferior to meaning. And if society or its secular agencies cannot provide the needed technological remedies, religious organizations may need to do so, but with the recognition that such stopgap measures are a distraction and diversion from their distinctive and indispensable service: making sense of the life of man." (P. 135)

Kelley speaks of social change as a "by-product." "Religious movements were not designed to achieve social changes. They were monumental upheavals of the human spirits directed toward religious objectives, of which social change was the more or less incidental by-product."

The relation between religious beliefs and social attitudes is the hottest question of our time among churchmen and sociologists.

There are interesting convergences between Kelley's observations and conclusions reached by the Strommen group in *A Study of Generations*. To be sure Strommen uses categories that do not coincide completely with those of Kelley. But it appears that there are critical elements in the categories of each that are so closely related as to relate their conclusions to each other.

In *Issues in Christian Education* in a review article on *A Study of Generations*, Dr. Ralph Underwager, one of the principal researchers, asks the question: "Is acceptance of responsible caring about other people's needs dependent upon the vertical dimension of relationship to God?" He answers: "The fact is that those persons who are unabashedly supernaturalists are

the same persons who highly value responsible service to other men. Those persons who tend to reject the vertical relationship to God also tend to rate service to other men low. Instead, other men are seen as means to the end of personal development or satisfaction of personal needs." "These two value dimensions, a transcendental value and self-development values, are at opposite poles for Lutherans. One tends to exclude the other. Persons who hold to values of self-development also tend to lower levels of personal piety, religious behaviors, and loyalty to the church. They also tend to feel somewhat alienated, isolated, and pessimistic. There is a tendency to believe in salvation by works, to exploit religion and society for personal gain, and to reject traditional statements of belief."

While speaking with relevance to the matter of church growth and the role of religion in social life, Kelley's book is also another contribution to a growing number that is causing a fresh look—one of more warmth and appreciation—at the role of minorities in social and religious life. "Sectarians" and dissent groups in religion meet needs that traditional and established groups may overlook, and even disparage. Religion sometimes needs to get a fresh start.

It appears that what is a virgin experience of grace in one generation tends to become a routinized institution in subsequent generations. This can happen even to a Gospel-wrought, Spirit-moved Christian experience. Such was Luther's comment about the Gospel being like a "Platzregen."

The task before the church is therefore: How can we present the Gospel and carry on our church life so that it is the certainty of the living Christ who is central in our thinking and life rather than institutional maintenance? How can we be a person-to-person related group of concerned people, rather than a proposition centered, bureaucratized structure-oriented community?

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