

IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
(AND OTHER "MAINLINE" CHURCHES),
WILL "LIBERAL EVANGELICALISM" SURVIVE
THE BUREAUCRATIC TAKEOVER OF "MODERN LIBERALISM"?

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The quotes are from Reinhold Niebuhr's descriptions of, respectively, the Evangelical & Reformed Church's theology & the Congregational Christian Churches', the latter "shading off to Unitarianism" (Louis Gunnemann, THE SHAPING OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, p.23; qtd. by Ted Braun, p.28 of ON THE WAY, Aug/94, Wis.Conf. of the UCC).

1 Yes, I think survival is the question, in the UCC (& other "mainline" churches), the survival of what has been for 55 years my theological position: devotionally & theologically evangelical but attitudinally & methodologically liberal. You might guess--wrongly--that I came into UCC from the E&R stream (whose theology fitted me): it was from the CC stream (where I was a theological misfit but a social-radical fit)....To fill in my story, which winds around post-WWI Christian intellectual history: The first church I joined (65 years ago) was "modern liberal." The next (1935) was fundamentalist. The next (1939) was traditional evangelical. Next (1941), neo-evangelical. Next (1944), "liberal evangelical" (though this had been my personal theological position since 1941)....Each decade, our American intellectual history of religion is being more competently written, so I'm understanding what's happened to me--& so understanding myself--better. You, too, wherever you've been & are on this mind-map: I'm understanding you better.

2 What isn't remembered doesn't survive as a player on the living stage: what's forgotten hasn't survived (except archivally, if that). I meet young UCCers who've little sense of, & less respect for, canonical-critical (liberal evangelical) thought. In public school they learned of Johnny Appleseed but not that he was a traveling evangelist & church-(not just appletree-)-planter. Each January, "Martin Luther King Jr." (i.e., the memory of him) becomes less religious, surrendering theism (trust in God) for humanism (belief in "humanity"). (My current letter to the editor says "Martin King had faith in God in spite of the inhumanity of his adversaries." I was responding to this by a black columnist: "His faith in the humanity of his adversaries had the power to replace despair and keep him on the path of nonviolence." The fallen arches of heaven!) Deuteronomy warned against this amnesia (8.18ff: "it is God who gives you power," not the faith you have in humanity, & "confirms his covenant"; forgetting God, "you shall perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God").

By 1934 I'd decided that "modern liberalism," the religion of my church, was a cut flower withering & drying up, forgetting its biblical (&, in that case, Methodist) roots. Now that same Zeitgeist (spirit-of-the-age) has captured the UCC bureaucracy & is controlling UCC publications (worship book, hymnal, education materials); & many of us are convinced that the "liberal evangelical" word cannot be heard above the "modern liberal" din: K. "heard nothing but the din that filled the whole place, through which a shrill unchanging note like that of a siren seemed to ring" (p.72, THE TRIAL, Franz Kafka [Schocken/25/75]). It's the PC siren set at the IL ("inclusive language") pitch. K. becomes so weak he can't walk till he's outside breathing fresh air. I want to stay in, if I can stand the stink.

3 "Me too" sells, but not my product: it sells what I'm "too" to. Today's version of the "modern liberal" church is selling not church but the world, the Zeitgeist to which it's "too," i.e. which it parrots with a clerical collar on the parrot. Witness "to" is transmogrified into witness "for"--blacks, "the poor," gays/lesbians, women, prisoners, the abused (women, children, pets), whoever can possibly be viewed as victim. Advocacy (efforts to be good news) is touted as though it were evangelism (the Good News, the preaching of which is constitutive of, & the central function of, the churches, the Church). It's the afterglow of the former enormous public influence on, & therefore responsibility for, the public sphere, before the public square became "naked" of churches. Congregationalism (which in 1931 absorbed the Christian Connection churches, & in 1957 began to infiltrate the mind of the E&R

churches) has been most deeply deluded by this publitisim (my antonym for "privatism"). Equally disloyal to the gospel would be, now, a despairing cynical pendulum swing (in the spirit of right-wing Republicans) from that old publitisim to an old-new privatism.

4 STORY: Coming into the employ of the UCC national bureaucracy soon after the creation of our church by the merger of the E&R & the CC, I experienced both the two streams as they were & the rushing, roiling **transition** to the new stream that back-defined the old streams as tributaries. I had, at different times, old CC superiors & old E&R superiors & could study up close their different styles of thought, discourse, & management. And I became widely acquainted with both sides' worthies (the two founders [St. Louis pastors], the two founding presidents, the two sets of bureaucrats, the signal academicians [including said Reinhold Niebuhr], & many of the leading pastors). And I think no labeling could be more accurate than what appears in this Thinksheet's title, including the fact that "liberalism" was a noun in the CC mentality but only an adjective, "liberal," in the E&R.

The primary E&R orientation, I found as I worked through the old E&R structures, was church-health: the CC parallel was world-change under home-board executive Truman Douglas, the primary ecclesiarch under whom I worked (& who called me, after my NCC debate with Billy Graham, a "hilarious Christian": he loved my radicalism & tolerated my evangelicalism). I loved his innovative spirit & tolerated his theological latitudinarianism. All recent UCC presidents have been of his stamp.

It's time for a church-health, world-change **balance**, but it may be too late. The world-change ideology, with its strict control of language, may have a stranglehold the churches cannot break.

5 What, if any, are the **boundaries** of "the people of God"? The OT & intertestamental periods show a diversity that carries over into Christianity & illumines the present theological split in the UCC. Israel as "the people of God" was both experience & hope (as is, in NT, the kingdom of God [in Jn., "eternal life"]). That fluidity/polarity continues in the canonical-critical ("liberal evangelical") church, but it ceases when "modern liberalism" uses "the people of God" inclusivistically, i.e. as a name for humanity: "God loves all people alike," a religious-humanist idea that reduces the biblical story to the doctrine of creation by absorbing redemption (the story--told beginning with Gn.12--of how God "bought back," delivered, a people of his special, mysterious love [Deuteronomy], whom he chose to send on a mission of blessing to all humankind [again, beginning with Gn.12, but the major theme of Isaiah 40-66]).

We should never tire of saying that biblically, creation is an afterthought from redemption: history (the history of "the people of God") precedes nature. Biblical religion has jumped the track if one gives primacy to the Creator, who loves the whole family of God (i.e., everybody; a Stoic, not a biblical, idea) & wants us all to get together & change things so as to be good news to one another & to nature. I applaud the sentiment, the good will, in this naturalism ("naturalistic theism," "process theology," etc.), but must state clearly that it's an alternative, & as such a rival, of Judaism & Christianity. (An excellent reading on all this is "Covenant, Election, People of God," chap. III of B. Childs' BIBLICAL THEOLOGY [Fortress/93].) In this heresy so well received by so many in the UCC, God's particular love (Deut., Jn., 1-3 Jn.) is as special grace sucked down into God's general (creational) love as common grace.

The difference is not between a particularism (of Israel or Church) degenerating into provincialism (social introversion, church-health being the single concern) or a generalism washing out into pale, impotent universalism. The difference rather is between a missionary people of God sent on a humanity-wide journey ("a light to the nations," Is.42.6; "make disciples of all nations," Mt.28.19) & a humanistic pluralism more inclined to repent to the nations for all the alleged harm the missionaries have done than to seek to convert those who've not opened themselves to the special, revealed light (Is.42.6; "I am the Light of the world" [Jn.8.12;9.5]).

Two inherently opposed sermons are now being preached in the UCC. I hate division, but not as much as I love truth, honesty, & the courage to confront the fact that two very different religions lie side by side in this one church.