

Keith Watkins

Religious Vitality In a Liberal Church

***Responding to “Evangelical vs.
Liberal” by James K. Wellman, Jr.***

I have long been interested in message, ministry, and mission as factors that contribute to the religious and organizational vitality of congregations. The importance of these factors and how they interact in Christian communities takes on a distinctive character when they are used to understand classic Protestant churches. When pastors and lay leaders understand how these factors act and interact, they are better able to lead their congregations forward into greater strength and impact upon their members and the larger communities in which these members and their churches live and work.

My interest in these issues is shaped by the fact that during the past half century there has been a dramatic shift in the religious marketplace of the United States. The Protestant denominations that were at the center of American culture and institutional life in the 1950s, have shrunk in membership even though the population has grown dramatically. During these same years, evangelical churches have grown significantly in their market share, in part because they have been able to generate and sustain very large congregations. Furthermore, the demographics of these two groups of churches (classic Protestant and evangelical) indicate that this shift will continue well into the future. The members of classic Protestant churches, now getting along in years, are remainders of constituencies that came into these churches when they were young adults with many children. To a distressing degree those children and then the grandchildren

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have disappeared from the churches of their youth. At the same time, churches in the evangelical movement have burgeoned, in part, because of their effectiveness in recruiting young adults, especially men, and their strong focus on families, children, and youth.

This shift in market share is especially interesting in the Pacific Northwest, which for generations has been characterized by a non-institutional, a-theological religiosity, a spirituality focused on nature and the common good. Until recently, this was the region in the United States with the lowest percentage of people who claimed to be participants in churches or other religious communities. If any form of Christian faith and practice would thrive in this environment, people might think, it would be classic Protestant churches, with their acculturated theology, openness toward varied life styles, and historic commitment to the common good. Yet, as James K. Wellman, Jr., reports in his book *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), this is not the case. Instead, liberal churches, which is Wellman's label for what I have been calling classic Protestant, have declined while evangelical churches have grown dramatically so that they have become the dominant Christian sub-culture in the region.

With financial support from the Lilly Endowment and the encouragement and assistance of colleagues and students at the University of Washington where he teaches, Wellman studied thirty-six thriving congregations in the region (twelve were liberal and twenty-four were evangelical). His book is an important collection of information about these churches and a well-shaped analysis of how their ministers and members think about the Christian faith, shape their churches, and extend their faith into the world of personal life and impact upon American society.

In Part I of his book, Wellman presents a historical sketch of how the major religious cultures have functioned in American life. He also describes his methodology for this study of Christian cultures in the Pacific Northwest. In Part II, he presents his findings, listed under five headings: Religion, Identity, and Moral Logics; Religion, Ideology, and Belief; Religious Ritual and Organizational Dynamics; Religion, Outreach, and Mission; and Religion and Politics. Part III consists of conclusions and explanations, which he summarizes in one chapter, "The Spiritual Capital of Moral Worldviews."

In this paper, which is informed by Wellman's book, I have two purposes. First is to understand more fully why liberal (henceforth, I will be using Wellman's term) Protestant churches have suffered such serious diminishment while a different kind of church has managed to do so well. The second purpose is to use this increased understanding as the stimulus for suggesting strategies for pastors and other leaders that could lead to increased vitality in liberal churches.

The Core of Religious Identity in Liberal and Evangelical Congregations

I am using the word *message* to refer to the core of religious identity in the two forms of Protestant Christianity that are the focus of Wellman's study. The term embraces matters of faith, doctrine, conviction, ideology, and belief. It refers to what churches preach and teach, portray in their worship, and use during counseling. The message shapes congregational life and influences the way that churches position themselves in public life. Evangelical and liberal churches appear to have relatively little contact with each other and therefore have only a superficial understanding of their respective messages. The tendency is to misstate the other's message, often in belittling or demeaning ways. Wellman counteracts this tendency in a constructive manner. While acknowledging the important differences between these two groups of churches, Wellman shows that both liberals and evangelicals maintain strong bodies of belief that are well understood by their constituents and that have direct consequences in everything that their respective churches do.

The first step for liberal churches as they move forward constructively is to understand the set of beliefs that consistently shape their life and to see how they are similar to and different from the set of beliefs held by evangelicals. The corollary is for liberal churches to acknowledge the effect that their message has upon their desire to be vital communities of faith and religious practice.

Wellman uses evangelical as a term to encompass three groups of conservative Christians, usually referred to as fundamentalists, Pentecostals and charismatics, and neo-evangelicals. In general, all of these churches "emphasize *conversion* (the need for a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ), *missionary activity* (the obligation to share with others this need for conversion), *Biblicism* (seeing the Scriptures as the sole authority for belief and action), and *crucicentrism* (the belief in Christ's sacrifice on the cross as atonement for human sin)" (p. 11).

One of the most important factors in understanding the religious market place today is that these four characteristics have contributed to "the recent surge of the entrepreneurial evangelical congregations; churches that are much less sectarian than their predecessors and much more engaged in transforming American culture and influencing American political culture with a form of civil religion," which Wellman labels the "civic gospel." Its characteristics include "the belief that evangelical conversion will address and solve social problems; the government should protect America's religious heritage; the United States was founded as a Christian nation; it is hard to be a political liberal and a Christian; the promotion of democracy around the world should be encouraged; and evan-

gelicals should advocate for economic, religious, and political liberty, and, by extension of these last two, support the war in Iraq” (p. 18).

Wellman gives less attention to describing liberal churches than to his delineation of the newly dominant evangelical churches. Here, too, he recognizes three types of churches—traditionalist, centrist, modernist—but he does not provide descriptions of the leading features of these three categories. He does, however, offer a “distinct set of ideological characteristics” that define the liberal churches as a whole. “They most often propose that Jesus is a model of radical inclusiveness—fashioning an ethic that emphasizes hospitality to those marginalized in society—justify themselves in their faith tradition as much by reason as by tradition or scripture, and leave decision making about faith or personal morality in the responsible hands of the individual. The moral worldview of these churches reflects a liberal theology that advocates for the concerns and rights of homosexuals; and supports justice causes such as peace, ending homelessness, and ecological stewardship. Even as the liberal moral worldview tends toward libertarianism in personal morality, it proffers stands on social justice and broader concern for the ‘common good’” (p. 5).

Liberals, Wellman notes, “are often known more for what they are not—*not* fundamentalists; *not* homophobic; *not* patriarchal—than for their positive characteristics.” One result is that they are marked by “diffidence,” which Wellman describes as “the refusal to form a false consensus; liberals seek to avoid conformism and will leave individuals with the task of making up their own minds. The unintended consequences of this liberal reticence, as many lay liberals make clear, weaken their ability to mobilize for principles close to their faith” (p. 6).

The differences between evangelical and liberal are stated with special clarity in Wellman’s discussion of “core allegiances,” and especially in these two brief statements:

For evangelicals, relationship trumps moral principles, and salvation by grace through Christ conditions and legitimates moral action. For evangelicals, first and foremost, the sin of the self must be overcome. In light of a holy God, how does one come before God to find favor and grace? Evangelicals find that favor in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. However, this is more than a simple transaction. It is, rather a living relationship that restores joy to life, inspires one to share a message of hope, and creates stronger relationships with families, friends, and those in need (p. 66)

The central question for the liberals is not so much the sin of the self but how to motivate and integrate the self in such a way as to align it

with the broader and more gracious ways of God. This God is all-loving and kind and, through Jesus, shows one how to live. To live is to treat others fairly and equitably, to love and forgive others as exemplified by Jesus, and to know the joy of God's presence as Jesus knew that presence (p. 66).

Ritual in the Pacific Northwest

Since the theology and practice of Christian worship has been the center of my theological work for half a century, I am especially interested in Wellman's treatment of ritual in evangelical and liberal churches. Near the middle of his book, he offers this definition: "Religious ritual is an imagined theological world embodied in consecrated action that seeks to infuse lived experience and thereby shape and guide human agency" (p. 139). He acknowledges Clifford Geertz's definition of ritual and reminds me of Susanne Langer's discussion of ritual in her 1942 book *Philosophy in a New Key* (which I first read in 1967): "A rite regularly performed is the constant reiteration of sentiments toward 'first and last things'; it is not a free expression of emotions but a disciplined rehearsal of 'right attitudes'" (A Mentor Book, 1951, p. 134).

Wellman turns to ritual because this is a primary means by which liberals and evangelicals instill their ideas and infuse them into the way that their constituents live their lives: "Each group has developed ritual behaviors and practices over time that use religious traditions to imagine new worlds that are integrated into lived experience with varying degrees of success" (p. 128). He writes that this binding of the two worlds—imaginal and every day—happens in different ways and with different purposes among the two groups, and then offers summaries that I find to be illuminating and provocative:

Ritual in liberal congregations: "For liberals, the liturgical formulas of the tradition are largely retained, though innovation occurs theologically that reflects their ideological concerns. The integration of relatively formal ritual practices is mixed with "progressive" theological doctrines that emphasize the "human side" of Jesus' nature, his egalitarian ethical practices, and hospitality to the marginalized in society. Liberal liturgy remains more attuned to a literate culture, satisfied with read words in the context of a post- or late modern era infused with technologies that emphasize changing images and messages other than the spoken or read text."

Ritual in evangelical congregations: “[Their] liturgies display homogenous forms that do ritual work by imagining a world that is intimately interwoven in lived experience. Evangelicals translate the theology of their evangelical traditions into the practices and aesthetics of contemporary Americans with sensitivity to the tastes and preference found within popular culture. It is somewhat remarkable that the theological message of sin and redemption, which is certainly held with some suspicion and even offense in many quarters of modernity, is nonetheless well integrated with the forms and instruments of modern media such that any discord is downplayed” (p. 139).

Although I am interested in understanding both forms of ritual, my focus is upon the continuing vitality of liberal congregations, with the hope that ritual in these churches will be increasingly effective in its two primary functions: imagining the world made right the way God would have it be, and helping people transform their experienced world so that it conforms to their imaginations. The challenge these churches face can be illustrated by two discussions of the contrast in ritual forms as used in evangelical and liberal churches. A news clip on public television several years ago compared two Southern California congregations—Saddleback Church and All Saints Episcopal Church—that were effective in their outreach to younger portions of the population. A few days later, a group of liturgical scholars were discussing the “high-tech, high-touch” worship that had been featured in the telecast. A young rabbi noted that this new kind of worship was fine for many people in her community, but that it alienated most of those who had found that older ways of worship had enabled them to survive the Holocaust and lifetimes in the ghettos of Europe and America. “These people we dare not leave behind,” she concluded.

This conversation poses the challenge for liberal churches: to develop rituals that sustain the old and that attract and inculcate faith and generate strong life practices among the young.

During a conference “Theology After Google” sponsored in 2010 by the School of Theology in Claremont, California, one presenter explained that “progressive churches have learned to be flexible in stating the central ideas of the gospel, but when it comes to modes of communication, especially in worship, they are fixed and unchanging. In contrast, evangelical churches are unyielding in their definition of the gospel but exercise complete freedom and imagination in how they express that message.” Most of the presenters were united in one purpose, which was to demonstrate new modes of presentation that could be adopted

by liberal churches seeking to appeal to new constituencies in this era dominated by the Web..

One of Wellman's observations is appropriate at this point, however, because it indicates that one group of liberal churches seem able to combine traditional ritual and a liberal theological view in an effective manner.

How does one appeal to liberals who refuse group-think and do so in a way that stimulates their interest and *commitment* to religious institutions? As we saw, some liberal congregations are more successful than others. In particular, Episcopal churches have achieved a mix of allowing liberals to 'think what they want' while at the same time offering a liturgical experience that is deeply rooted in a tradition. This balance maintains an aesthetic and ritual coherence but does not inhibit the free range of thought and action. The Episcopal churches center on the liturgy of the Eucharist--nothing could be more traditional or orthodox--and yet the members felt the greatest freedom theologically; all questions were open and opinions heard. Parishioners were rooted in a liturgical center giving tactile and sacramental form to the liminal nature of their questions and doubts (p. 272)

Wellman's conclusion needs to be highlighted:

“I am not sure that liberals know they want both a form of tradition and the space of free thought, but in practice this combination allowed for the most vital forms of congregational life”
(p. 272).

An especially interesting section of Wellman's analysis is entitled “Web as Ritual” (pp. 147-154). A church's Web site, he proposes, “is an electronic representation of how the church imagines itself and how it relates itself to the lived world of its members and potential visitors.” It is clear that evangelical churches pay more attention to their electronic presence and in most cases spend more money on what they present on the Web. Wellman notes that the sites of liberal churches are oriented toward conveying information to members. They emphasize denominational connections and the idea that faith is a journey. They seem not to give a high priority to making sermons available or in conveying content about their churches. Evangelical churches, however, have links for potential first-time viewers, with downloadable sermons and worship services. Evangelical Web sites “nearly always bury denominational affiliations in out-of-the-way links,” while liberal sites “either use denominational templates for their Web sites

or offer links to their affiliations.” After describing one liberal Web site that was similar to the evangelical sites in many respects, Wellman concludes that “whether in liberal or in evangelical congregations, I found that local rather than generic media design correlated with greater congregational vitality.”

Wellman’s discussion of what he calls the ideological content of Web sites indicates that for the most part liberal and evangelical churches post material that is consistent with their basic core values. Thus he can say that the “tenor and trajectory of evangelical Web sites was remarkable different than the liberal Web sites.” Furthermore, liberal sites tend to be defensive by explaining what their churches were not and by describing their historical connections, while “evangelical Web sites were fully committed to what their churches are and what they intend to be in the future.” Evangelical sites clearly expected visitors and thus were continually changing their pictures and content. “The communal and interactive nature of the evangelical Web sites integrated users or at least gave the opportunity for viewers of the Web site to participate in and join the imagined vision of the church in their own experience, facilitating connection and creating a ritual experience that is one of the ways many Americans ‘do’ their religious lives.” Evangelical sites consistently gave high priority to the experience of worshipping God and “the personal intimacy that evangelical liturgies nurtured.”

Religion and Politics

Toward the end of his book, Wellman discusses the contrast of liberal and evangelical churches with respect to religion and politics. He notes that there has been a reversal in this regard, from a time when the forerunners of today’s liberal churches were unified in their understanding of faith and life values and were the primary voice of Christian faith in American life to the current situation in which evangelical churches have taken over this role. He points out that both liberal and evangelical churches give higher priority to values than policies in their political advocacy and activity. “Liberals seek an administration that is compassionate toward homosexuals, women, and minorities.” They want evenhanded tax policies, generous social programs, and foreign policies that are fair toward other nations. Liberal Christians, however, “show enormous caution in trying to implement religious policies into political discourse and polity.” A major reason is the heterogeneity of their congregations. They “cannot assume a common political agenda in their congregations.”

Wellman states that in contrast, evangelicals “are not as hesitant about influencing politics, particularly when it comes to what they consider ‘moral’ issues of abortion and gay marriage. In general, the ethos of government should uphold the civic gospel—underlining and illustrating the power of the elective affinity

between the evangelical and conservative American political moral worldviews” (p. 236).

For evangelicals, Wellman concludes, the “core enemy” is sin, and “the division between God and humans is real and powerful, motivating the cross and mobilizing Christ’s followers to get their relationship to God right and to share that good news with others, before it is too late.” For liberals, however, “the good news is the destruction of social systems that create social oppression. This is the ‘shalom’ that so many liberals mentioned in the study, the peace of the world incarnated such that all are welcome and equality rules the day. For liberals, the ultimate enemy is ignorance of this unconditional favor and the sad aspect of humans creating boundaries of exclusion.” For liberals and evangelicals, Jesus is the central focus, “but in the case of liberals, Jesus is the focus that offers compassion and hospitality to the world; in the case of evangelicals, Jesus is a source that saves them from the world by creating a new one to come” (p. 268).

Making an Old Church Young Again

In his concluding chapter, Wellman offers the list of ingredients that can be used to make congregations thrive. To highlight these features, I am reformatting his paragraph into bulleted lists.

Evangelical entrepreneurial congregations

- use the aesthetics of the popular culture,
- create networks of small groups,
- nurture entrepreneurial leaders,
- appeal to young families,
- offer alternative forms of religiously based activities,
- and provide a core conservative theology that puts forward religiously based activities that attract and maintain vital subcultures in both suburban and urban settings.

Liberal congregations, though with less numerical success, can create vital congregations by

- embodying a progressive liberal theology,
- mixing traditional liturgy and active social justice programs,
- facilitating adult education and worship experience that allow for informal communities,
- and integrating a worship design that appeals to families and children.

Immediately following these lists, Wellman adds two observations that are especially important for leaders of liberal churches to consider as they think about their futures. The first: “Liberals can appeal to younger people if they want to, but it was clear at times with the churches in this study that they did not want to.” The second grows out of the emphasis in liberal churches upon individualism: “Paradoxically, this emphasis on autonomy both attracts northwesterners to these churches, but also mitigates strong commitments to these groups. It is a catch-22 that every liberal congregation had to deal with in this study: How does one appeal to liberals who refuse group-think and do so in a way that stimulates their interest and *commitment* to religious institutions” (p. 272)?

It clearly is the case that the changes in the religious situation in American life which Wellman discusses are general in their character and extent. They characterize the changing demographics of church and society everywhere across the nation. Despite this fact, however, local factors influence how these factors come to bear upon the life of every congregation. Many evangelical congregations remain small and demonstrate their inability to ride the wave of popular religion that has enabled some congregations to become very large. Furthermore, a few liberal congregations buck the tide, showing the ability to renew themselves and grow despite the fact that the general features of life in America seem to work against them.

Thus, the basic question that congregations have to ask is whether they want to change. As Ronald Heifetz has pointed out in a recent book, for many traditional organizations the pain of gradually diminishing (and perhaps anticipating death) is easier to bear than the pain of entering into effective change and transformation. If they decide that a new period of vitality is God’s will and their earnest hope, these congregations have no choice, Heifetz continues, but to engage in a process of controlled experiments that reconstruct their institutional DNA so that the congregations can thrive in a new cultural milieu (see his book *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Harvard Business Press, 2009).

Here is my list of actions that can be undertaken by liberal churches that now are old and want to become young again:

- Give a lot of attention to articulating the core ideas of liberal faith in language that makes sense to people today.
- Show with examples from personal experience that these ideas make a difference in how people live and cope with the challenges they face.
- Pay special attention to ritual so that it is grounded in the church’s core tradition and is expressed in aesthetic forms that communicate to a broad cultural and generational range.
- Develop strong programs oriented toward young marrieds and their children.

- Find specific ways to support members in their personal “ministries” in private and professional life.
- Develop a short list of community-oriented ministries of mercy and justice that the congregation as a corporate body will engage in.
- Remember the adage that we should pray as though everything depends upon God and work as though everything depends upon us, and the scripture text that says what while we plant and water it is God who gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:7).

For a brief explanation by Ronald Heifetz of the importance of adaptive change, check the site listed below (accessed January 18, 2012).

<http://www.faithandleadership.com/multimedia/ronald-heifetz-the-nature-adaptive-leadership>