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The Mainline Is Becoming the Sideline

by Ed Hindson



These days the major Liberal denominations are customarily referred to as "mainline" Protestantism. Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Conservatives in general are painted as ecclesiastical "rednecks" who are out of the mainstream of American religion. However, several recent studies reveal that Conservatives are growing and Liberals declining at such a rate that the mainline is in danger of becoming the sideline!

During the decade of the 1970s the United Methodists lost nearly a million and the Episcopal church lost nearly a half million. In the last 20 years mainline denominations have experienced a combined membership decline of nearly 5 million people. Dean Kelly, a church growth expert with the National Council of Churches, admitted at a recent conference sponsored by the Center on Religion and Society that he could not name a single church at-

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tached to the NCC that was experiencing growth of any kind.

Enrollments at Liberal seminaries are also down drastically. A recent survey of "What Students Are Shunning," in the September 4, 1985, *Chronicle of Higher*

Education (p.32), reveals that only 0.2 percent of all students choose to study for the ministry in the first place. While Conservative seminaries like Dallas, Grace, Liberty, Temple, Trinity and Westminster have been experiencing record enrollments, the mainline seminaries have seriously declined. That means the percentage of Conservatives entering the ministry is continually increasing. In other words, it is only a matter of time until the Conservative clergy hold the majority of America's pulpits.

In its September 2, 1985, issue, *TIME* magazine heralded the growth of Fundamentalism with a cover feature and two editorials on the impact of Conservative Christianity in America. Noting that Fundamentalists "have not been so well financed, visible, organized, and effective" since the 1920s, the editorials acknowledged that Fundamentalism is "bursting beyond the church walls into the wider society."

The *TIME* articles pointed to the existence of 1,000 Christian radio stations (one in nine nationwide), 10,000 Christian schools, at least 13 million viewers of religious television, and unparalleled church growth among Conservatives. In an era of theological indifference and ethical relativism, more obviously than ever, Fundamentalism is becoming the predominant voice of religion in this country.

The facts cannot be ignored. Liberalism is in reverse and shows no signs of changing gears. In the meantime Fundamentalism has been in overdrive putting its dynamic force into the political and social arena. Committed to the absolute authority of Scripture and undaunted by criticism and public opinion, the resurgence of Fundamentalism into the mainstream of American life could well change the course of history by the end of this century. ■

Mainline Denominational Losses 1970-1982

American Lutheran Church	190,064
Christian Church (Disciples)	268,021
Episcopal Church	491,687
Lutheran Church in America	181,189
Presbyterian Church in U.S.	143,264
United Church of Christ	243,885
United Methodist Church	1,052,186
United Presbyterian Church in USA	744,772

Statistics adopted from *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 1984*