

The Decline of Mainline Protestantism in America... And How the Evangelical Church Can Avoid the Same Mistakes

by Mark Tooley

Mark Tooley, the president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, spoke at our Areopagus Forum twice in February. The following are excerpts from his lecture at Perimeter Church on February 19.

Recently a Nashville-area church pastor who professes to be an evangelical made headlines by announcing his church's acceptance of same-sex couples. There was more media coverage for a Portland, Oregon minister whose evangelical denomination cut ties with his church after he announced his support for same-sex marriage and LGBTQ affirmation.

Until fairly recent, debates over same-sex marriage and homosexuality were reserved for historically liberal mainline Protestant denominations that have had a 40-year debate over Christian sexual ethics, having accepted liberal theology many decades earlier. Those debates have only accelerated the mass defection of millions of Christians from these churches. Fifty years ago one in six Americans belonged to a mainline Protestant church, while today the percentage is one in sixteen. More accurately, "mainline" Protestantism has become "oldline" and even "sideline."

But elements within American evangelicalism are now succumbing to the same theological, ethical, cultural and political patterns that marginalized mainline Protestantism. Except that liberal hegemony over most mainline Protestant denominations took about a century, whereas in evangelicalism the same process is unfolding far more quickly....



For generations the leftward drift of mainline Protestantism, often disguised behind vaguely phrased sermons that utilized orthodox language, was largely undetected by most church members who were uninformed about the machinations of distant seminaries and church agencies operating in their name and with their financial backing. But research by my organization, the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), exposed the truth of what was going on behind the scenes in terms of the theological, social and political agendas of the elites within these mainline denominations....

During this period of mainline decline, evangelicals quietly were growing in numbers, filling the void left by the mainline retreat and spearheaded by Billy Graham revivals, the founding of *Christianity Today* magazine, the increasing stature of evangelical colleges and seminaries, and by an explosion in entrepreneurial parachurch ministries....

The Areopagus Calendar

Seminars

Christianity Thru the Centuries:
The Post-Apostolic Era and the Writings of the Church Fathers, c. 100-325 A.D.

Dr. Jeffrey Breshears
Sundays – 11:15 AM
Johnson Ferry Baptist Church / Loft A



Forums

ISLAM: AN UPDATE

A presentation by
Iraj Ghanouni
President, Christian Center of Islam Awareness Ministry



Wednesday, March 11th
6:30 PM
Johnson Ferry Baptist Church
Room 105

The Decline of Mainline Protestantism in America... And How Evangelicalism Can Avoid the Same Mistakes

(continued)

Starting in the 1960s, the mainline implosion facilitated the collapse of the American moral consensus, creating forty years of culture war and polarization. Evangelicals began to organize politically in the late 1970s, concerned over secularization, abortion, radical feminism, pornography, and America's receding influence in the world....

The election of George W. Bush in 2000 and his reelection in 2004 motivated left-wing philanthropists to fund alternative evangelical initiatives that would pull evangelicals in a more liberal direction. George Soros began funding Jim Wallis' *Sojourners* magazine and organization at this time, and other new evangelical activist groups emerged espousing more liberal perspectives on immigration, the environment, and sexual issues....

New efforts to create a formidable evangelical left arose at the same time that many traditionally evangelical institutions were in the process of becoming more liberal theologically, socially and politically....

The newly emboldened and well-funded evangelical left was enthusiastic in its support for Barack Obama.... About one-third of young evangelicals supported Obama, giving hope to the evangelical left and its liberal allies that evangelicals would no longer be a political monolith....

Meanwhile, liberal evangelicals, as they have increasingly replicated the mainline Protestant experience, seem oblivious or indifferent to the historical causes of the decline of mainline Protestantism. The evangelical left has become increasingly bold in departing from Christian orthodoxy, particularly on sexual issues.... There is a growing stratum of evangelical elites and activists who avoid abortion, marriage, and other hot-button issues as unnecessarily contentious in favor of a more socially-acceptable agenda such as advocacy for victims of sex trafficking, environmentalism, lobbying for illegal immigration, and advocacy on behalf of

the poor. The annual "Justice Conference," endorsed by many evangelical schools and parachurch groups, exemplifies this trend....

Nearly all of the troubling trends of this new form of evangelical activism are rooted in a basic theological error: the assumption, as in the early years of the Social Gospel, that people are fundamentally good, and our problems stem from social inequality, racism, sexism, and unjust social systems.

Evangelicals who veer-off in this utopian direction have, by definition, departed from traditional orthodox Christian belief. They have become liberal Protestants, essentially like Episcopalians but lacking their rich liturgy and tradition and good taste....

Mainline Protestantism has declined for decades, yet it survives due to 350 years of history and often generous endowments, with extensive institutional networks. By contrast, evangelicalism is mostly a modern American phenomenon that lacks the ballast of the mainline churches. As a result, and unlike mainline churches, liberal post-evangelicalism likely will not endure for many decades.

But before its demise, liberal post-evangelicalism may wreak a lot of damage in the church, mislead a lot of people, inflict a lot of spiritual harm on society, and portray a disfigured face of Christianity to the world even more erroneous and destructive than that of mainline Protestantism. For this reason, committed evangelicals are called to avoid the passivity and silence of mainline Protestants of previous generations who were too polite and genteel to openly challenge the subversion of their venerable church institutions. The sad trajectory of mainline Protestantism has already demonstrated the fruits of a compromised Christian witness. Let's commit to protecting evangelicalism from a similar fate.

Note: The full texts of both of Mark Tooley's Areopagus Forum lectures are available at the Areopagus website, www.TheAreopagus.org.

The Areopagus Calendar

Forums

Do We Need God To Be Good? What Is the Source of Morality?

A dialogue with

Dr. Richard G. Howe

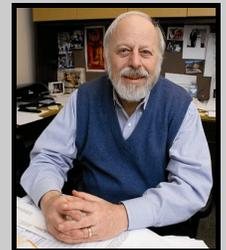
Professor Emeritus of Philosophy
and Apologetics,

Southern Evangelical Seminary

— and —

Dr. Melvyn Fein

Professor of Sociology,
Kennesaw State University



Thursday, March 19th

7:30 PM

Perimeter Church / Fellowship Hall



Old Testament Genocide And Divine Justice: What Are We To Think?

A presentation by

Dr. Paul Copan

Author and Professor of Philosophy and
Ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University



Saturday, April 25th

9:30 AM - 12:30 PM

Perimeter Church
Uptown Auditorium

[www. TheAreopagus.org](http://www.TheAreopagus.org)