The Resilience of Conservative Religion

The Case of Popular, Conservative Protestant Congregations

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Contents

Introduction

It is commonplace today to divide American Protestantism into dying and thriving groups. The old mainline Protestant churches, especially the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA), are shrinking. In contrast, conservative Protestant churches are holding on to their share of the expanding American population. This book is about the survival of the latter type of religious groups. Members of such churches may consider it arrogant to question why conservative churches are doing relatively well. Yet it seems true that objectively the strength of conservatism should be a puzzle. After all, we live in a time of rapid change. It is not obvious why at such a moment leaders who advocate conserving old ways are relatively popular.

Several reasons for the continuing strength of conservative Protestantism are straightforward. Compared to the mainline groups, conservative Protestants have more children. Moreover, their leaders discourage conditions associated with being unchurched: childlessness and divorce. People stay in or join churches because they want their children to have a religious education. Divorced people stay away from churches, in part, because so many congregations are family-oriented.

Conservative Protestants also devote more time and energy to evangelism. A congregation's outreach program is important. Sponsoring revivals and advertising programs at a church may aid growth. Of more importance, however, is whether a congregation is encouraged to reach out to others. Even near-strangers can be influential, especially if the strangers tell a conversion story that makes clear a need shared with the potential newcomers to a congregation. Almost all of the people discussed in this book first became interested in their new congregations because of some comments made by a member of the congregation who

was also a newcomer's family member, friend, neighbor, or coworker. Conservative Protestant churches survive, in part, because they try harder to do so.

Such churches also retain more of the people who grow up in the churches. Any significant changes in lifestyle or religious affiliation are often influenced by exposure to new options but deterred by social pressure from others favoring the status quo. Urban living and education are likely indicators of exposure to new ideas; conservative Protestants are more likely to live in rural areas and less likely to be highly educated. The degree of social pressure to remain the same is related to the frequency of interaction with similar people. White conservative Protestants have the highest marriage rates and, among those living in multi-adult households, conservative Protestants are more likely than members of other religious groups to live in religiously homogeneous households. Moreover, conservative Protestants tend to live together in the same parts of the United States. Because they live in households and regions where people share similar religious beliefs, conservative Protestants experience greater social pressure not to switch religions.[1]

But it is also true that many people switch from having no religious preference or from being a member of a mainline religion to being a member of a conservative Protestant church because they find such churches to be appealing. During the period 1972–87, about one out of five people raised in mainline Protestantism left that religious family to join a conservative Protestant church. Within conservative Protestantism, one out of seven switched to mainline churches. Why the difference?[2] The purpose of this book is to further our understanding of what people like about conservative Protestant congregations. As Coalter, Mulder, and

1. The data confirming my description of conservative Protestants can be found in Kosmin and Lachman (1993:71–2, 258, 240, 107).
2. Such differences cannot be interpreted as moving from a liberal to a conservative congregation. For instance, in Middletown (Delaware Country, Indiana), almost all white conservative congregations have theologically conservative pastors, but the white mainline congregations are led by pastors who are roughly equally divided among three theological categories: conservative, moderate, and liberal (Johnson and Tamney 1986:52). Thus, an unknown number of people switching to conservative denominations in Middletown would have been members of mainline congregations with conservative pastors or of congregations that had had such pastors. The data about the 1972–87 period is in Greeley (1989:34–6).

Weeks (1996:33) emphasized, "People join or leave congregations, not denominations." To understand national changes, it is necessary to study specific congregations.

In 1996 my assistants (Peggy Shaffer and Susan M. Ryan) and I began a study meant to find out why people joined successful conservative churches and what currently appeals to them about the churches they joined. The interviewees were residents of "Middletown," who recently joined Protestant churches. "Middletown" refers to the county containing the city of Muncie, Indiana. Robert and Helen Lynd (1929) wrote the classic study of this community, giving the town its sociological label. They believed that Middletown was reasonably representative of white, Anglo-Saxon culture. What is important about Middletown for our purposes is that it contains a variety of Protestant churches.

The issue is not why people are religious but why they have joined a specific congregation. These are distinct matters. For example, a person might be religious because she wants to believe in a life after death and attends a specific church because her friends are members. In another type of case, the two matters may be closely connected. For instance, a person might be religious because he wants to feel loved by Jesus, and the person may belong to a specific church because the congregation's liturgy makes him feel close to Jesus. Our objective was to discover why the person was attracted by a specific congregation.

Whether or not a particular congregation is popular certainly depends, in part, on the resources available to it. Congregations with money, paid staff, and abundant volunteers are more likely to offer attractive programs and thus to be popular, all else aside. Similarly, groups with skilled workers such as eloquent preachers and talented musicians are better candidates for success, at least within Protestantism. In the text, I will note from time to time the presence of such resources, but they are not my primary concern. What I wanted to know was what it is about conservative Protestant theology and rituals that people find appealing.

Chapters 3 through 6 concern the four congregations in the 1996 study. In them I describe what people found attractive in each of the congregations. In writing Chapter 2, I used other sources of information. In order to understand the appeal of conservative Protestantism in the early-modern United States (i.e., prior to World War II), I used historical research and some classical sociological studies, including the work of

the Lynds in the 1920s and 1930s. Knowing what made conservative congregations appealing during early-modernity helps give us a better perspective on more recent developments.

In Chapter 1, I develop the framework used throughout the book by discussing both the nature of conservative religion and theories about what makes the content of a religion appealing to contemporary Americans.