

## The Collapse of the Liberal Church



On Saturday, July 28th, 2012, Margaret Wentz, a columnist for the Globe and Mail newspaper, wrote an extraordinary and perceptive essay on the “collapse of the liberal church”. The article dealt mostly with the United Church of Canada, though it could be applied to other branches of the Church as well. <http://www.globeandmail.com/commentary/the-collapse-of-the-liberal-church/article44>.

Margaret outlined the stats—since 1965, the United Church has shrunk nearly 60%, such that the average age of its members is 65. In passing, she mentioned that the Episcopal Church has shrunk 25%; and though it was not mentioned, the Anglican Church of Canada has certainly done the same.

Why? In the 1960s, to be “more relevant”, the Church decided to “become more open, more inclusive, more egalitarian, and more progressive. It was a colossal flop,” she said. And in my opinion, Margaret is right.

According to opinion polls, the vast majority of people believe in God. This in spite of most educational systems, which have banned any positive opinions of Christianity in school classes, banned prayer, even banned the terms “Christmas” and “Easter” in many schools. Yet the liberal churches, instead of helping people affirm and understand God, have concentrated on social issues, ecology, justice issues, empowering women, and collecting for food banks. And though these ideas were all good, they simply weren’t good enough.

The Church was established by Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and charged with taking the message of salvation to the whole world, “baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them all that Jesus commanded them.” In other words, the job of the Church was to bring people into a living loving relationship with Jesus, so that we would be connected to the God the Father in a new saving relationship—a relationship that would allow us to grow into the Saints that God had intended us to be. As we were being changed, bit by bit, from forgiven sinners into saints, we would be expected to build the Kingdom of God right here. In theological terms, it was a Life of Salvation that originated in personal sanctification and should result in societal sanctification.

The liberal churches saw the need for societal sanctification and set out to do it—to build the Kingdom—while they rejected the need for personal sanctification—sort of having the cart while rejecting the horse. And people, who instinctively knew they wanted a real relationship with God, turned away. After all, if being a Christian is becoming a “do-gooder” we certainly don’t need the Church—just go on out and “love everybody,” as the song says. Or as Margaret said, “If you really, really care about the environment, why not just join Greenpeace.”

There is nothing wrong with what the liberal churches thought they should do—they were wrong in forgetting the basic changes that were needed in humanity FIRST—which is why Jesus died, rose again, and founded His Church. As Margaret wrote: “With so little spiritual nourishment to offer, it’s no wonder the liberal churches have collapsed.”

As the liberal churches floundered, their place has been taken by the so-called Evangelical churches. And they have prospered. They concentrated on everyone’s need of personal salvation—a new and life-changing relationship with a God who loves them. Sure, these churches get tangled in their Biblical literalism; sure, they often forget that changed people are supposed to be building the Kingdom. Sure, some of them cause a separation of their converts from family and friends. Sure, these churches do reinforce individualism at the expense of community. But at least they are telling people about the new life that we need that comes from a new and living relationship with Jesus Christ. “God loves you; He always has; He always will.”

On the other hand, the evangelical churches, just as the liberal churches, have forgotten about “mystery.” Our society tries to make everything so easy and practical—but each of us knows instinctively that there is more to life than eating, sleeping, working, and consuming. We know that life is mysterious, and that “mystery” is our human attempt to apprehend the reality of God. Mystery is one of the things that separates us from the animals; we want to go beyond ourselves, beyond our simple comprehension, beyond the “things” of this world. And religion, primarily Christianity, is the prime way for people to reach out to encounter mystery. That is one of the reasons why the Roman Catholic Church continues to be so successful. When people come to the mass, they encounter mystery—not in the sense of the unknown—but in the sense of the incomprehensible mystery of God, the reality of a Creator who is always greater than us.

Anglican (Episcopal) and Orthodox Churches, like the Roman Catholic Church, are good at this when they celebrate the mass (eucharist). It is all well and good to make the mass open and intelligible, as long as it also brings people into the reality of mystery. It is this that protestant churches, and especially the liberal ones, have forgotten. While concentrating on the here and now, they have forgotten the mystery of our relationship with God, through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Within the Anglican (Episcopal) and Roman Catholic Churches, movements like Cursillo are renewing the faith of millions—rebuilding that which has been lost. And these are the Christians who are flocking back to the Church.

Is the Church “finished,” and in decline? Not where people are brought into a living relationship with Jesus Christ; not where people can experience the mystery of God’s Presence in the mass; not where faithful Christians are living out their faith day by day, growing in Christ, and changing the world around them to make it into the Kingdom of God.

Margaret Wentz, you were right in what you wrote; but there is more to the story that is yet to be told. When Christians learn to love the Lord and discover His Presence in the

mystery of the mass, God is using them to change the world. You ain't seen nothing yet.  
Amen.

On October 8th, I sent a letter of support to Margaret Wente, telling her of the sermon (above) that I had written "defending what she had written". Here is her note in response:

*Thank you. Your words mean a great deal.  
I'll be back next week—and looking forward to it.  
all best,  
Margaret Wente  
Columnist  
The Globe and Mail*