

In the News

Prestonwood Baptist Church

Younger Evangelicals are taking Movement in a New Direction

Evangelicalism is undergoing both a generational and thematic shift, says William McKenzie

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By William McKenzie

Jonathan Merritt nailed his equivalent of "95 Theses" to the door of the Southern Baptist Convention. And the door surprisingly opened, at a speed much faster than Martin Luther experienced in Wittenberg almost 500 years ago.

Mr. Merritt, a 25-year old seminarian, got religion a year or so ago about the perils of a changing climate. More specifically, the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary student began thinking about how his fellow Southern Baptists needed to make a bigger priority out of the environment.

He started pressing the issue and benefiting from the contacts that flowed from the days when his father presided over the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest body of Christian believers in the U.S. next to Roman Catholics.

One thing led to another, and this month the Southern Baptists – the Southern Baptists! – adopted one of those formal church statements that signal a sea change. The leaders of the convention, which include high-powered pastors like Dr. Jack Graham of Plano's Prestonwood Baptist Church, pledged to do better in addressing climate change.

This shift may not be as significant as the Reformation that Martin Luther spawned with his list of grievances against the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, welcome to your new evangelicalism.

What's going on among evangelicals is a both a generational and thematic shift. Mr. Merritt's advocacy typifies what you see among the new wave of evangelicals, which Southern Baptists are with their emphasis on conversions and the inerrancy of Scripture.

Younger leaders are stepping forward to replace or push aside the Jerry Falwells, James Dobsons, Pat Robertsons and James Kennedys. That first group of evangelical political leaders set the movement's social agenda from Ronald Reagan's 1980 election through the 2004 general election. But they have been losing their grip for several years. In fact, change is hitting full speed today.

This is a good thing. Evangelicalism is one of the most powerful movements in American culture and politics. Whether you like or dislike the movement is beside the point. What happens within evangelical churches, schools and organizations affects the rest of our society.

Without a more modern vision, however, evangelicalism was going to keep taking us down the same old, divisive trails, such as debating whether gay couples should be free to form civil unions. No doubt an important subject, but it was hard to see why it deserved such an elevated role in the last presidential race, other than to scare voters on both sides to the polls.

By broadening evangelicalism's agenda, younger evangelicals like Jonathan Merritt, Rick Warren and Mike Huckabee are doing us a favor. They're shifting the political discussion to issues like climate change, AIDS in Africa, Darfur or the struggling middle class.

This transition is nicely detailed in David Gushee's new book, *The Future of Faith in American Politics*. A younger evangelical himself, the McAfee School of Theology professor chronicles the emergence of an evangelical center.

There are international aid organizations like World Vision, publishing houses like InterVarsity Press and activist groups like the Evangelical Environmental Network. And next month in Pennsylvania, a wide range of evangelicals, including Mike Huckabee, are asking the remaining presidential candidates to participate in a "Compassion Forum," where issues like global AIDS and the environment will get discussed.

While they're at it, I'd love to see some of these new evangelicals wade into the faith-and-science debate. Not just the one about climate change, but the broader ones, such as how the human condition survives in a technological world.

Polish philosopher and Catholic priest Michael Heller had a wonderful line last week when he won the Templeton Prize for his work in science and philosophy: "Science gives us knowledge, and religion gives us meaning. Both are prerequisites of the decent existence."

The new evangelicals have done enough, though, to warrant the attention of the Big Thinkers behind John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Whenever a 25-year old can get the attention of the Southern Baptist Convention, you know something's rumbling.

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