Reclaiming a peculiar faith

by Stephanie Paulsell in the August 11, 1999 issue

Three senior pastors of large mainline churches describe, in the words of one, their "ascent out of liberalism." They offer fragmentary glimpses of how a postliberal church, exiled from cultural prominence, ought to read scripture, preach, worship, form faithful Christians and engage in social action. Some of these glimpses (especially of the teaching and social ministries of the church) offer a rich alternative to the "church growth" models that have been proposed as the solution to the problems of mainline congregations. Unfortunately, the diatribe against "liberalism" pervading the book obscures and sometimes distorts its most promising ideas.

The authors insist that the "liberalism" they believe has so harmed the mainline is "philosophical," not "political," liberalism. But when the only liberals named are Harry Emerson Fosdick, Fred Craddock, Norman Lear, the members of the Jesus Seminar and Paul Tillich, it is difficult to know whether or how philosophical liberalism differs from political or theological liberalism. Someone unfamiliar with the preaching or writing of Fred Craddock could come away from this book thinking that Craddock believes that "issues related to human fallibility and self-deceit are moot because we are basically educated, sensitive and caring people who have overcome what we used to speak of as 'sin.'" Such glib, unsupported statements are characteristic of the way the authors describe "liberalism." Liberals mistrust the Bible, are made uncomfortable by worship, disdain history and care only for their own perspective. "The trinity of philosophical liberalism," the essay on preaching announces, is "me, mine and myself."

I admit to some confusion over the heavy load the term "liberal" has been asked to bear in this book, and not only because I grew up hearing Fred Craddock preach and know very well that he does not believe human beings have overcome sin. The word "liberal" has a variety of resonances within mainline churches. There are plenty of churchpeople who continue to associate the term "liberal" with civil rights, the ordination of women, and the responsibility of each person to study the scriptures, expecting to be challenged and changed. When Martin Copenhaver, Anthony Robinson and William Willimon call us to follow them in their ascent out of liberalism,

what exactly are we being asked to reject? And what are we being asked to embrace?

In the essay on scripture, for example, the authors write, "Both preacher and congregation may have difficulty accepting or living under the word that has been given to us. There are some truthful messages to which we are not yet prepared to respond, 'Amen.'" They state that the way to handle passages that disturb us is to trust them enough to live by them. I appreciate the way the authors try to reacquaint us with the strangeness of scripture and renew our vulnerability to it. But "trusting the word enough to live by it" has one kind of implication if the word is "sell all you have and give to the poor" and quite another if it is "wives, be subservient to your husbands." The book offers little help for negotiating such differences.

The authors deride historical-critical scholarship as a stumbling block to good postliberal practice. But what about the stumbling block of scripture itself? The Jesus Seminar did not invent the idea that scripture has the ability to confound us with contradictions and difficulties. Origen and Augustine understood very well the difficulties careful readers of the Bible encounter and never hesitated to investigate those difficulties with all the spiritual and intellectual resources at their disposal. I join Copenhaver, Robinson and Willimon in longing for the church to live more intimately with scripture. But might not our task be to find richer ways of integrating prayer and study, history and theology in our encounter with the Bible, rather than taking one more jab at the Jesus Seminar?

When the authors turn down the volume of their diatribe against liberalism, their proposals for renewing the church come through more clearly and convincingly. This is especially true in the chapter on the church's teaching ministry. The authors offer a rabbinic model of the pastor as "community-based teacher of the faith" as an alternative to the model that views the pastor's role as primarily therapeutic. They also insist on the teaching ministry of the whole Christian community. They resist the unhelpful distinction between the church at worship and the church in the world by reminding us of the many ways that worship of the living God teaches us how to be Christians. They also insist on the social witness of worship itself: worship forms us to respond to the claims of a just and merciful God, rather than to the claims of a culture that defines us as consumers. At a time when Christians often seem more at home with the language of the social sciences than with the language of faith, these are welcome suggestions.

The book is born of a desire that Christians learn again to "to speak in their own distinctive language" and "to be motivated by the peculiar faith they claim" in a culture that no longer embraces the church as a powerful institution. This is a desire worthy of our best work. I wonder, however, if exile is the right image for a church that can no longer rely on "American Christendom" to support it. Doesn't exile imply that we are separated from a place to which we hope to return?

The authors insist that they do not wish to return to the days when the church and the establishment were more intertwined. But the word "exile" suggests a nostalgia for those days, a longing for authority. In our desire to renew the mainline churches, are we looking for new ways to wield our lost authority, if not in the culture, then in the church itself? Recent church trials of pastors who have performed holy unions for gay Christians offer the most explicit and disturbing examples of such an impulse. Does an understanding of the sacraments as a ruler that draws "a line between believers and nonbelievers, insiders and outsiders" not also betray a desire to define a space within which we can recover and exert our authority?

Perhaps the problem of the mainline churches is not that we have been sidelined by the culture and exiled from the seat of power. Perhaps our problem is that we haven't learned how to bear witness from the margins without consuming ourselves.