ABSTRACT
In recent years, Evangelical Protestantism and Christian Fundamentalism have received a great deal of attention concerning their influence and impact on American society and culture over the last fifty years. Because of that, the impact and influence of Mainline Protestantism has frequently been overlooked. This essay examines both Evangelical and Mainline Protestant churches’ reactions and statements to three movements from the mid-twentieth century to the present: the Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, and the Gay Rights Movement. In doing so, I argue that Mainline Protestant churches have actually had a greater, though more subtle, impact on American society and culture than previously thought.

A Force Overlooked: Mainline Churches’ Influence on American Civil Rights Movements since the Mid-Twentieth Century

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Since Christianity’s beginnings, various sects have existed, all vying for the hearts and minds of humanity. While the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions remain largely homogenous, Protestantism has been historically divided. From its very origins it fragmented into various denominations whose views, while largely similar, differ on varying matters of doctrine and dogma. The first evident “split” occurred in 1529 when Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, two reformers, were unable to agree on a set of theological issues, thus creating two separate reformed churches.\(^1\) During the remainder of the century, various Protestant groups emerged with opposing views. The Church of England represented one of these Protestant groups, which ensured that many English speaking Christians would embrace Protestantism in some form. Various sects came to America beginning in the seventeenth century, especially dissenters of the Anglican Church such as the Puritans and Baptists. During the next century other groups followed, bringing myriad versions of Protestantism as well as Catholicism to America, all contentiously practicing side by side.

It is from this background that two branches of Protestantism developed in twentieth century America – Mainline and Evangelical. The sharp divide between the two arose with the beginnings of Fundamentalism in the late nineteenth century. Evangelical churches

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embraced Fundamentalism and sought to preserve what they considered true Christian teachings. Mainline Protestant churches generally accepted Liberal Theology, a Christian theology open to modern reason as well as personal, intellectual, philosophical, and existential reflection. These Mainline churches claimed that while their teachings were updated, they were nonetheless true. Moreover, they argued that Fundamentalism’s emphasis on literalism was now archaic. The two sides were also separated by Darwin’s theory of evolution, as Mainline churches were more likely to accept evolution than Evangelical churches.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the impact and influence of Evangelical Protestantism on American society and politics have been clearly visible. If one considers Christianity in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, one can quickly think of conservative names, movements, and political stances: Billy Graham, pro-life movements, and opposition to gay marriage. But what about the Mainline churches? Mainline churches actively participated in movements such as the Social Gospel and the Civil Rights Movement. Further, after the success of these movements, the Evangelicals often joined, or at least consented to, the goals of the movements, revealing the Mainline’s subtle, but clear influence.

Evangelical Protestantism represents the larger of the two traditions and has received the majority of attention and credit in shaping recent American society and culture. However, in the current essay, I argue that Mainline Protestantism’s influence has not only been overlooked, but that its contribution to American civil rights reforms has had a greater, though more subtle, impact on the development of American society from the mid-twentieth century to the present. To do so, this essay addresses three crucial movements within the twentieth century – the Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, and the Gay Rights Movement – and examines the involvement and responses of Mainline and Evangelical churches. By examining the statements and reactions from both Mainline and Evangelical Protestants, I demonstrate the lasting and current influence of the Mainline churches in matters of social justice and civil rights in America, by working within their churches to foster equality and by engaging in reform movements outside their churches.

Background Information

Mainline Protestantism includes most Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians, as well as other small denominations such as the United Church of Christ. In his book, The Public Church, Martin Marty describes the Mainline as having “known fewer difficulties than have others with the public order, but greater problems with being the church, with remaining intact as a center of loyalty to Christ.” Mainline churches have appealed to individuals who embrace the “priesthood of the believer,” but have weakened the churches’ focus on the Triune God as revealed in Jesus, meaning they have been less concerned with converting others to Christ. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mainline Protestants were characterized by their acceptance or openness to Liberal Theology, critical study of the Bible, the theory of evolution, and an emphasis on a social application of the Gospel.

According to Paul Rasor, “liberal theology tries to articulate a framework within which one can be deeply religious and fully modern at the same time.” Adolf von Harnack was a German Liberal theologian who wrote many works, including What is Christianity? Characteristic of Liberal Theology, he wrote “that the earth in its course stood still; that a she-ass spoke; that a storm was quieted

2 Peterson, A Concise History of Christianity, 328.
6 Peterson, A Concise History of Christianity, 326-328.
by a word, we do not believe, and we shall never again believe.”  

In other words, miracles were denied as impossible and (in the words of the Enlightenment philosophers) unreasonable. Liberal Theology sometimes questioned the divinity of Jesus, the accuracy of the New Testament Gospels, and elements that seemed to be supernatural, such as the physical resurrection of Jesus and his physical Second Coming. Those who supported Liberal Theology also promoted critical study of the Bible, as with any other work of literature. This involved research and examination as to how the current texts were originally written and by whom, how they were passed down, and how they may have been edited and redacted. From a liberal perspective, evolution was less of a problem because the Mainline churches tended to view the Genesis creation narratives as simple stories that the ancient Hebrew people told to help them understand who they were in relation to God. These stories were merely theological narratives, not scientific ones. Moreover, it seemed possible that God was the guiding force behind evolution, fostering biological progression and development.

Mainline Protestantism also advocated a social application of the Gospel. The Social Gospel movement during the American Progressive Era constituted a reformation of society, one entreating Christians to live out the teachings of Jesus regarding the unprivileged and employing American society as a means to execute the will of God. Instead of just trying to save the souls of the dispossessed, the adherents of the Social Gospel hoped to uplift such individuals through political or physical means.

In response to these Mainline beliefs, Evangelicals contended that the truths of the Gospel were being lost to the modernizing trends of Liberal Protestantism. The word “Evangelical,” comes from the Greek word “ευαγγέλιον” or “euangélion,” which translates into English as “Gospel” or “Good News.” The term must be qualified. In areas outside the United States, “Evangelical” is often used interchangeably with and more often than that of “Protestant,” without any of the connotations or meanings that “Evangelical” holds within the United States. American Evangelical denominations include most Baptists and Nondenominationalists, along with some Lutherans and small portions of other denominations. 

Marty describes modern Evangelicals as “[having] less problem with being the church in the sense of a called out and set apart body. But they have had more difficulties with public consciousness, with discerning how they are called to serve God beyond the specialized field of saving souls out of the world.” According to Marty, then, Evangelicals have succeeded at being a spiritual community, but have been less successful outside of their focal mission – “soul-saving.” Today’s American Evangelicals were heavily influenced by the Fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century and this is what helped create the two distinct sides of Protestantism in America. Through the influence of Fundamentalism and cultural conservatism, Evangelicals were characterized by opposition to Liberal Theology, critical study of the Bible, the theory of evolution, and a social application of the Gospel.

Evangelicals rejected Liberal Theology. They saw the Liberal theologians as eliminating the “fundamental” truths of Christianity and simply retaining a moral philosophy. Fundamentalist scholars enumerated the most important Christian doctrines and these were often (but not always) what the Liberal theologians had been calling into question. These included “(1) the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) the Virgin Birth of Christ, (3) his substitutionary atonement, (4) his bodily resurrection, and (5) the authenticity of the miracles.”

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9 Peterson, A Concise History of Christianity, 327.
11 George Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, 2.
13 Marty, The Public Church, 3.
14 Peterson, A Concise History of Christianity, 326-328.
this rejection of Liberal Theology and acceptance of Fundamentalism, the inerrancy of scripture often proved to be the most essential tenet of their faith. The Fundamentalists considered the “higher criticism” of the Bible as antithetical to their convictions and asserted that those who searched for errors and called for such radical examinations of the Bible were obviously losing faith and could influence other Christians to challenge God’s Word. Evangelicals saw Darwin’s theory of evolution as a false teaching culminating in atheism. Evolution, they argued, was fundamentally different from the Christian understanding of science, nature, and creation, with no chance of reconciliation. Finally, the Evangelicals rejected the social implementation of the Gospel and emphasized personal salvation over societal change. The Evangelicals agreed that Jesus loved people and wanted his followers to love other people, but then stated that the greatest expression of that love is to share the truth about God as revealed in Jesus in order to provide individuals an opportunity to accept God’s grace and avoid the fires of Hell.

Examination of Reform Movements

Civil Rights Movement

By the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to build momentum and draw both support and opposition from Americans of every background including Christians. Many leaders of the movement were ministers, but some of the harshest criticisms came from the pulpit. Many factors came into play as to how Christians reacted to the movement, including whether one was a Mainline or Evangelical Protestant.

Mainline Protestant churches drew upon a heritage of social activism. When the Civil Rights Movement started in earnest, Mainliners were ready to go. The Christian Century, the leading magazine of Mainline Christianity, published several articles endorsing the movement. While it cannot be assumed that all Mainline Protestants supported the views in the magazine, it can be inferred that the majority of them did because the publication reflected their interests and beliefs. Also, The Christian Century influenced the Mainline understanding of the events and issues. As early as 1960, the magazine embraced the movement. An editorial concerning the sit-in protests wrote, “We expect the turmoil to spread, but we do not expect this nonviolent resistance movement to be defeated. When its work is done we will have a better America.” They recognized that social justice might engender trouble, violence, and chaos, but they believed in what the Civil Rights Movement stood for and they saw something worth fighting for (through civil disobedience, of course).

Not only were Mainline churches supportive in morale, but they also participated in the movement. A group of fifty-three Episcopal clergy and laymen traveled to Washington, D.C., during October 1963 to support the passage of Civil Rights legislation. While it could have been expected that the group would be made up of all northerners, the group also included representatives from southern states. The Reverend Arthur Walmsley, a participant on this venture, spoke and gave reason for their gathering: “From the standpoint of Christian conscience, it is scandalous that it is necessary to require legislation to give part of the people what all should have.”

The Lutheran Church in America proposed a resolution at its Biennial Convention in 1964 that expressed ardent support for civil rights and spoke harshly against those who discriminated, even saying that those who used a biblical justification for discrimination had a distorted view of God and Scripture. They resolved that “the church must oppose any law or governmental practice which under the guise of rightful authority perverts justice.”

15 Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 117; other lists included the physical, imminent return of Christ, see Peterson, A Concise History of Christianity, 328.
16 Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 112.
17 Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, 37.
18 Peterson, A Concise History of Christianity, 329.
The Lutherans believed strongly that discrimination against fellow humans went against the law and love of God. Therefore, civil disobedience was acceptable and even exemplary if it ended discrimination. The clergy of the Episcopal Church proved quite active. According to the Diocesan Press Service, an Episcopal priest was arrested on April 24, 1964, in Chester, Pennsylvania, for leading and participating in a demonstration. He had even attempted to prevent an officer from hitting an African American participant by putting himself in between the two. Presiding Bishop Lichetenberger expressed solidarity and support for the priest and the movement.22

Evangelical churches responded to the Civil Rights Movement with less enthusiasm. Some in fact chose to ignore the issue. Evangelical denominations tended to avoid social activism as a regular practice and instead they focused on mission work at home and abroad. As their name suggests, they felt called to evangelize and to spread Christianity to the world and to those closer to home. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) issued a resolution dealing with race relations in 1944.23 It stated:

That this Convention would urge the pastors and churches affiliated with the Convention, and all our Baptist people, to cultivate and maintain the finest Christian spirit and attitude toward the Negro race, and to do everything possible for the welfare of the race, both economic and religious and for the defense and protection of all the civil rights of the race.24

This statement guided the SBC’s stance on race relations throughout the Civil Rights Movement, as it was often reaffirmed by the SBC at subsequent Conventions.25 The Baptist Press, the newspaper for the SBC, published several articles dealing with the Civil Rights Movement. An early article quoted the president of Mercer University, a Baptist institution, as calling for the enforcement of civil rights legislation in southern states. The reasoning for this was based mostly on his assumption that if the southern states refused to act, further and stricter legislation regarding integration would be implemented by the US Government.26 That had to be avoided.

Wayne Dehoney, president of the SBC in 1964, argued that the SBC and its members should accept and follow the civil rights legislation because God had instructed humanity to follow laws, as long as they did not violate God’s laws or one’s conscience. At first it seemed that this was all he had to say, as if the law should simply be obeyed from a completely legal standpoint. However, he finished by saying that the gospel must continue to work on the hearts of humanity to “eradicate the prejudice that spawns racial discrimination.”27

The Church of God responded to the Civil Rights Movement and legislation with a resolution which declared that constitutional rights should be recognized. However, the resolution did not call on Christians to advocate for such rights.28 The Church of God recognized that all people are equal and should have equality, but there was no call for action or participation. The Church of God appeared to have good intentions, but for the most part it remained out of the fray. Similarly in 1965,
the SBC issued a resolution concerning civil rights. An amendment was added that stated that the members of the Convention “deplore the open and premeditated violation of civil laws, the destruction of property, the shedding of human blood, or the taking of life as a means of influencing legislation or changing the social and cultural patterns.”

Southern Baptists considered the demonstrations to be progenitors of social chaos and disruption, things with which they did not want to be associated.

In general, the Mainline Protestant Churches proved more vocal, supportive, and participatory in the Civil Rights movement than their Evangelical counterparts. While supportive in intentions, Evangelical churches rarely provided their members with any practical means to help bring about the equality they professed to support. While Mainline denominations gave express permission and direction to engage in the movement because of their understanding of God and the Bible, the Evangelical churches were not so direct in their calls for equality and they generally did not advocate participation. It must be recalled that the Fundamentalist/Evangelical influence had the greatest influence in the South and the majority of Mainline Churches were elsewhere. Thus the South, Civil Rights, and religion were interwoven.

Mainline Protestants were less affected by Southern attitudes towards minorities, although that did not mean that Northern culture was free of prejudice.

In 1995, the SBC issued a resolution apologizing for its past endorsement of slavery, noting that “Southern Baptists [had] failed, in many cases, to support, and in some cases opposed, legitimate initiatives to secure the civil rights of African-Americans.” While this is commendable, over thirty years passed between the 1964 Civil Rights Act and this resolution. The SBC realized it had not done enough and that the culture had gone on without it. The Mainline denominations’ fight for equality had become the fight of the nation. Given that, the Evangelicals acknowledged that they had been wrong and resolved not to let their prejudices influence their view of God and humanity again.

**Feminist Movement**

Just as African Americans had demanded that their rights and proper status in American society should be upheld, women too began to call for equality in the 1960s. Women wanted to change the way society, including their churches, viewed and treated them. Most denominations at the time did not ordain female clergy and these churches had long taught that women were to be submissive to their husbands. Some women felt that Christianity and full gender equality were incompatible. Others saw the Bible as perfectly suited for feminism, especially in the life and ministry of Jesus. The churches had to make a choice: they could oppose, support, or ignore the Feminist Movement.

While many Mainline denominations were considered progressive, at the beginning of the 1950s most did not ordain female ministers. Several Biblical passages assert the authority of men in both familial and religious matters and even expressly forbid women to teach men. As early as the 1850s some United Church of Christ churches began ordaining women to serve as clergy. As a denomination following Congregationalist

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31 Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention.”
34 See 1 Timothy 2:1-12; Ephesians 5:22-23.
polity, the UCC churches could decide on the issue independently of each other. A century later, the Methodist Church began to ordain women in 1956. The Lutheran Church in America began doing so in 1970 and the Episcopal Church in 1976, although a group of Episcopal women had been ordained unofficially a few years prior. The effect of the Women’s Right’s Movement is evident – most Mainline churches were not calling for change prior to the movement, but rather responded to it.

By the 1980s, Mainline denominations were actively working towards eliminating sexism from their churches and fully incorporating women into leadership positions. The United Methodist Church elected its first female bishop in 1980. Not only had the church decided that women could be spiritual leaders of churches, but they could be part of the hierarchy of the Church as well. In 1972, less than one percent of clergy in the Methodist Church were women, but by 2004 they made up nineteen percent of the clergy, a significant increase. The Methodists had obviously taken measures to turn what was once an exclusively male position and open it up to women who felt called to ministry. In 2006, Episcopalians elected the first female presiding bishop, revealing that their entire community of believers could be led by a female. Once the ordination question passed, Mainliners were more willing to call for equality outside of their churches. For example, in 1982 the Episcopal Church called “upon the Congress of the United States once again to enact the Equal Rights Amendment [a proposed constitutional amendment to grant women full equal rights with men] and submit it to the legislatures of the several states for ratification.”

In the 1960s, Evangelical churches also did not allow women to be ministers, usually citing scripture as justification. For Evangelicals, the ordination question proved much more difficult to overcome than it was for Mainline churches. Evangelicals placed great emphasis on the authority of the Bible, declaring it infallible. If scripture said that women were not to serve in leadership roles, they would choose to obey even if their decision was unpopular. In 1973, the SBC issued a resolution concerning the role of women saying that its members reaffirm God’s explicit Word that (1) man was not made for the woman, but the woman for the man; (2) that the woman is the glory of man; (3) that as woman would not have existed without man, henceforth, neither would man have existed without the woman, they are dependent one upon the other—to the glory of God.

The SBC made it clear that it was sticking to its Biblical understanding of gender and gender roles and that it had no intention of changing its structures to go against the understanding it held of Scripture. The SBC

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maintains its position on the ordination of women for pastoral roles to this day, arguing that it should remain true to scripture and not allow the broader culture to influence its decisions. Thus Fundamentalist theology of the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture maintains its high place in Evangelical churches, even regarding the role of women. Finally, the SBC resolved in 1980 that, “reaffirming the biblical role which stresses the equal worth but not always the sameness of function of women, does not endorse the Equal Rights Amendment.”

Not all Evangelical traditions prohibited female ministers. Another Evangelical denomination, the Oneness Pentecostal Church, promoted female pastors from their very beginnings, as twenty-nine percent of all of their ministers were female in 1919-1920. It too believed in the infallibility of the Bible, but it also emphasized the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome barriers such as discrimination. However, this denomination represented less than three percent of Evangelicals as of 2007. Given that, its decision cannot be viewed as representative of most Evangelicals.

Mainline Protestants and Evangelicals once again differed in their approach to a civil rights matter – this time the rights of women. Mainline Protestant churches were greatly affected by the feminist movement. Both the Lutheran and Episcopal Church began to ordain women during the Women’s Rights Movement (although the Methodist Church had begun female ordination of ministers before that time). They supported the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment, along with fifty-six percent of the country in 1982. Evangelicals on the other hand were not as heavily affected by the Feminist movement and few Evangelical churches welcomed women to the ministry. They were against the ordination of women pastors and also the Equal Rights Amendment because of their commitment to Scriptural authority. The Feminist Movement caused Mainliners to realize that they needed reform and that the time for women in pastoral roles had come. Mainline denominations opened the doors to equality and moved forward to greater Christian unity. The SBC and Evangelicals remained less affected by the broader culture and reacted against it, reiterating their beliefs about women even when they were not popular.

Gay Rights Movement

Following in the wake of the Civil Rights and Feminist Movements, the Gay Rights movement emerged by the late 1970s. Homosexuals had been discriminated against for decades and now they too began openly voicing their demand for full equality and acceptance in American society. In recent years, they have successfully protested and fought for legislation to allow them the same rights as heterosexuals, such as the right to marry and equal opportunity employment legislation. This has created a problem for some religious groups as, in the opinion of some, the Bible expressly prohibited homosexual behavior. How have Protestant churches responded to yet another group demanding its civil rights? While this is still an ongoing issue, the response has usually been determined by whether the denomination is Mainline Protestant or Evangelical.

Mainline denominations did not ordain homosexuals before the Gay Rights Movement.

49 See Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.
nor did they immediately begin to do so when the movement emerged in the 1970s. Still, Mainline churches have made attempts to be open to all members regardless of sexual orientation. In 1976, the Episcopal Church declared that “homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church” and “homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection of the laws with all other citizens, and calls upon our society to see that such protection is provided in actuality.” While this did not immediately prompt sweeping changes and reform in the Episcopal Church, it does illustrate that the church was open to gays and lesbians and was taking steps to respect them.

Mainline Churches try to accept homosexuals, even if they are unsure about the homosexual orientation itself. In 1993, an article in the Christian Century argued that legislation banning gays from serving in the military was discriminatory and a civil rights issue, predicting that in several years this issue would be resolved and make those who sought to exclude gays “look uncivil and immature.” In 1994, the Episcopal Church issued a resolution calling on local, state, and federal government bodies to give same-sex couples similar benefits as those enjoyed by married heterosexual couples. While this did not necessarily represent a call for homosexual marriage rights, it did signify a call for equality under the law. In a survey completed in 2007, the Pew Forum found that fifty-six percent of Mainline Protestants felt that homosexuality should be accepted by U.S. society, while only fifty percent of all Americans felt that homosexuality should be accepted. This evidence revealed that Mainline Protestants have generally been more accepting and open to homosexuals than the general American public has.

By 1979, interest was building as to whether Mainline churches should ordain homosexuals to ministerial roles. Once again, a conflict over ordination began to divide the churches. In 1979, the Episcopal Church issued a resolution after looking into the possibility of ordaining gays and lesbians. The Episcopalians resolved to “re-affirm the traditional teaching of the Church…[that] it is not appropriate for this Church to ordain a practicing homosexual.” The Presbyterian Church likewise agreed, but asserted that “Heterosexism, the oppression of this sexual minority, is not compatible with Christian faithfulness.” Mainline churches tended to walk this tightrope, balancing a traditional view of human sexuality with an acceptance of the individual.

Years passed with no major developments in any of the denominations until changes swept through in 2009. First in July of that year, the Episcopal Church voted to allow homosexuals to be ordained into ministerial roles, replacing a 2006 resolution that “urged Episcopal leaders not to elect gay bishops.” Just a month later the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA, a Mainline denomination despite the Evangelical in its name) followed in the Episcopal Church’s lead and also allowed for the ordination of homosexuals to ministerial roles.


homosexuals. Less than two years following the ELCA’s assembly’s vote, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted to permit homosexual ministers as well, “opening doors to qualified clergy and lay leaders without regard to sexual orientation.” Thus, in an extraordinarily brief period of time, three large Mainline denominations embraced gay clergy. Despite being the first major Mainline denomination to ordain women to ministry roles, the United Methodist Church, the largest of the Mainline churches, still does not allow homosexuals to be ordained, saying, “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

At the beginning of the Gay Rights Movement, the response of Evangelical churches was similar to those of Mainline churches. In the same way that both groups were unsure how to address the issues raised by the Feminist Movement, they were similarly unprepared to deal with gay rights. Unlike Mainline denominations, which tended to oppose the homosexual lifestyle while embracing the individual, Evangelicals often used sharp and decisive language. The SBC issued a resolution in 1980 stating its belief that “there is a concerted effort by ‘Gay Activists’ and liberal humanistic politicians to pass ordinances which, under the deceptive guise of human rights, have the effect of giving public approval to the homosexual lifestyle, making it equally acceptable to the biblical heterosexual family life style.” In addition to viewing homosexuality as a spiritual problem, Southern Baptists also considered it a threat to society in general and urged secular leaders to prevent its acceptance. They denied that the Gay Rights Movement was fighting for civil liberties and supported the military’s exclusion of gays arguing that it would be detrimental to morale, unit cohesion, good order, discipline, and mission accomplishment...[and] [h]omosexuality in the military would endanger the life and health of military personnel by the increased exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and by enhanced danger of tainted blood in battlefield conditions.

According to the 2007 Pew Forum survey, only twenty-six percent of Evangelicals believe homosexuality should be accepted by society, while fifty percent of all Americans support acceptance of homosexuality. This shows that Evangelicals are significantly more opposed to the homosexual lifestyle in comparison to Americans in general.

Finally, when it comes to the ordination of homosexuals, Evangelicals have rarely considered the matter. The only SBC resolution that dealt with the subject was passed in 1976 and prohibition of the ordination of gays was a side note in the resolution. There has been no other resolution that has even mentioned homosexual ordination following this resolution. These obstacles were and still are too large for Evangelicals to foreseeably reconcile homosexuality and ministry.

While the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Rights Movement divided the Mainliners and Evangelicals, the Gay Rights Movement has created even deeper divisions between the two. Even from the Gay Rights Movement’s beginnings, Mainline churches were supportive of homosexuals and pushed for equal rights, even if Mainliners did not agree with gays and lesbians’ sexual lifestyles. Evangelicals, on the other hand,
expressed their convictions of the sinful nature of homosexuals and the negative influence of homosexuality on American society. Currently, the position taken by Mainline churches is seemingly in line with the prevailing view of the nation, with the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and the increasing number of states allowing same-sex marriage. Also, as the data from the Pew Survey have shown, Mainline church members go beyond the average American in their acceptance of homosexuality. 64

Conclusion

Although recent historical studies have emphasized the key role played by Evangelicals in the rise of political and social conservatism in the United States, when it comes to matters of civil rights and social justice – be they based on race, gender, or sexual orientation – Mainline churches have played a significant role and continue to do so. During the Civil Rights Movement, Mainline churches impacted American culture more than Evangelicals because they rallied support for the movement and actively participated in it, even allowing for the breaking of laws if they could help another person. Mainliners called for the government to enact legislation and actively supported the laws after they were passed. The Mainline churches did not wait for the populace to become more accepting of civil rights, but instead preceded the American people in calling for the equality of African Americans. Although Mainline churches largely implemented changes after the Feminist Movement began, most Mainline Protestants embraced the gifts and callings of its women and supported the Equal Rights Amendment and the rights of all women, while Evangelicals fought against such changes and sought to prevent the ERA from passing. During the Gay Rights Movement, Mainline churches did not always agree with homosexuality, but they have led the charge for reforms outside of the church and within. Most Mainline denominations eventually ordained homosexuals, which has demonstrated their commitment to equality. Many of the Mainline Protestants’ current views on homosexuality are more in line with what seems to be the prevailing mood of the nation. Mainliners likely will continue to support gay rights into the foreseeable future, but Evangelicals are unlikely to change their stance due to their commitment to the literal interpretation of scripture.

From the mid-twentieth century to the present, the views that the Mainline churches have promoted dealing with civil rights and social justice have become those of the majority in America. By promoting these ideals, Mainliners have worked to create a better, more accepting America. Through all of this, Mainline Protestantism has remained an active force in American society, lively and committed to serving God, their members, and the world.

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