

Sightings 4/16/07

Evangelical Adaptations

-- Martin E. Marty

Since over one-fourth of U.S. citizens are listed in the demographic or sociological category "Evangelicals," we should spend at least one-fourth of our energies sighting accounts of them in the secular media, our chief zone of operations and spying. Recent treatments stress some significant changes within the camp, changes which fair-minded observers should note before they generalize and stereotype.

Dr. David Instone-Brewer, an evangelical scholar who has written at book length on the subject, in the *Wall Street Journal* discusses reasons why evangelicals, who once spoke with horror and judgment against divorce and the divorced, are now blithely settling for possible presidential candidates who have divorced repeatedly. Why the change? Frankly, because "the divorce rate among evangelicals is actually as high as that of the general population." In short, M.E.M. observes, "Everybody's doing it, so why preach against it?" On such terms, many in this camp long ago gave up supporting "Sunday closing" laws and other instruments that helped keep them from violating one of the commandments. Opposition to alcohol, which once led them to total support for tee-totaling, has softened now. Et cetera.

We used to wonder about the selective literalism in moral judgments, noting inconsistencies on the evangelical front -- just as we notice them on every front. Why today such vehement denunciations of homosexuality, about which the Jesus of the gospels is silent, and to which the Paul of the epistles devotes only a half-dozen lines -- while both Jesus and Paul were firm in opposing divorce when it then meant remarriage to someone whose former spouse is still alive? How to wriggle out? Saint W. C. Fields was a model: He said he'd been studying the scriptures many years, looking for a loophole.

It turns out that Dr. Instone-Brewer and two scholars he cites, Craig Keener at Duke University and William Heth at Taylor University, who earlier had written books affirming the traditional biblical anti-divorce stands, "now teach differently," as does Instone-Brewer, himself a convert to the revised cause and code. "They conclude that Jesus and Paul would have rejected no-fault divorce and that they would have permitted a wronged partner to initiate a divorce based on the Old Testament grounds of adultery or neglect. This new scholarship may allow evangelical leaders to say what they have wanted to say for some time -- that divorce is permitted so long as there are strong grounds for it."

Instone-Brewer reports that some other evangelical scholars go further: "abuse and abandonment are valid grounds," as one would hope, while others advocate a "covenant marriage" in which spouses agree not to divorce unless James Dobson of Focus on the Family promotes this creatively wriggling approach. But where evangelicals used to gulp when dealing with divorce and the divorced, now that they are "doing it," they are more generous. Only "Mr. Giuliani, whose philandering apparently helped lead to both of his divorces" at the moment is still criticized. If they are stuck with him as the potentially willing candidate, will they keep on opposing philandering?

The point of all this is to note: 1) evangelical diversities; 2) evangelical adaptation to the times; and 3) celebrations of affirmation of those who must divorce. But questions remain. For example, are not almost all divorces undertaken by partners who both say that "there are strong grounds for it"? Don't count on evangelicals or anyone else to hold the line here if their candidates or they "do it."

What's the next barrier to fall? Is this a slippery slope?

References:

David Instone-Brewer's article "Evangelical Separation Anxiety" appears in the *Wall Street Journal* (April 6, 2007), and can be read at: <http://www.opinionjournal.com/taste/?id=110009907>. His book *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (InterVarsity Press) is an informed scholarly review of the arguments pro and con the new measures about divorce.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.