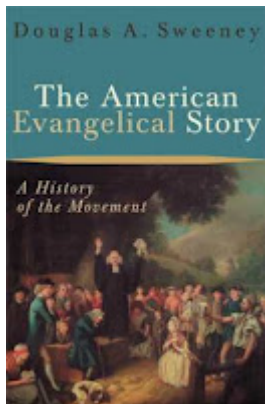


Review: The American Evangelical Story



Of all the sorts of books that I've read since leaving College six and a half years ago books about church history have been in the minority.

It's rather strange really – I enjoyed studying church history and have found it of immense importance when considering future and present church issues, particular church planting and “fresh expression” strategies. I find a lot of church planting theory irrelevant and/or paternalistic – description invalidly turned to prescription. In general, you can learn more from a good account of real stuff that has happened.

And so I picked up Douglas Sweeney's *The American Evangelical Story* on special one day. It is a short book, an overview. It was cheap, relatively light, but a good way back into this part of the discipline. I chose the topic because the contemporary American church is so important but I do not understand it's roots well. After reading this book my understanding has improved.

It helped remind me that there is nothing new under the sun.

- We see young guns in 1741 failing to keep connected to the previous generation (“James Davenport... denounced New Haven's minister from the pulpit of his own church – while he was sitting in the audience!” Page 56).
- Charismatic experiences of the ilk of the Toronto Blessing are not new (“Signs and wonders appeared all around, as hundreds of worshipers, slain in the Spirit,

barked like dogs, jerked uncontrollably, fell into trances, danced, and shouted.” Page 72)

- The tendency to compromise the gospel for pragmatic purposes is not new (With reference to preaching to slaves, “Some of them promised never to preach on God’s deliverance of the Israelites from their bondage to the Egyptians... the pact they made with these masters led to distortions in their preaching and wound up helping the masters more than it did the slaves.” Page 110)
- We even have reference to Old and New Calvinism – not in 2009, but 1700’s! (Page 58).

I was already partly familiar with the early chapters – it is covered in most histories of the Reformation and also the Wesleyan times. It was the last two chapters that I found particular helpful. These deal with the rise of Pentecostalism, and neoevangelicalism – the two broad aspects of American Evangelicalism which have direct effects today.

With regard to Pentecostalism I was intrigued with how the ancestry of Pentecostalism derives quite clearly from Methodism and the influence of the Great Awakening. The characteristic of a “second blessing” spirituality is present:

“The early Methodists maintained a goal of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, which they believed could had by faith during a supernatural “second blessing” from God. After conversion, Wesley taught, God continues to work within us, putting to death the deeds of the flesh and consecrating our lives for him. However, there comes a point for many when, dissatisfied with incremental progress in the faith, they seek and receive a second work of uniquely supernatural grace that lifts them to a new level of evangelical piety. Now entirely sanctified, they no longer want to commit sin.” (Page 135)

I had not realised this link from the Holiness movement

through the likes of Charles Parham, linking up with the momentum of African American spirituality in William Seymour, producing the Azusa Street revival that is considered the “birth” of American Pentecostalism. It was useful to see it and Sweeney does well to show how the Azusa Street revival drew from many differing aspects of the Awakenings that preceded it, crossing denominational, gender, and race boundaries as it did so.

Sweeney continues the path into the post-second-world-war era and shows the impact of Pentecostalism on the mainstream in the Charismatic Movement. We can see the roots of the likes of John Wimber and Fuller Seminary. This is a good perspective. He doesn't go much beyond this, however, and we do not get an insight into the upsurge in prosperity doctrine moving churches away from classical Pentecostalism in the 1980's and 90's.

The final chapter, unpacking the “fundamentalist controversy” of the early twentieth century, gave me insight into the groundwork of “neoevangelicals” like Billy Graham after the second world war. I did not realise the issues that both separated and connected these two generations. Sweeney speaks of

“those who stayed in the mainline until the early twentieth century defending their faith – and seeking to keep control of the mainline Protestant churches – in an age beset by new mental and social challenges (fundamentalists); and those who regrouped after they lost the mainline Protestant institutions, building their own, mainly parachurch, web of evangelical ministries from which they would succeed in reengaging American culture (neoevangelicals)” (Page 156)

It was in this last chapter that I could see a direct influence on, and a parallel to, the controversy within the Anglican Church at the moment. Here are evangelicals wrestling

with the priority of gospel ministry, the place of politics and institutional power-games, and the unchanged points of attack from liberalism. Niehbuhr's quote about liberalism – "a God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." (Page 161) – speaks from that era to this time.

Not that the evangelical side is completely lacking in blame, however. I was intrigued with the portrayal of how the influence of dispensationalism and premillennialism on the evangelical gospel over-spiritualised it and removed it from grassroots activities and social reform that had previously been motivated by the "postmillennial hopes of many early evangelicals" (Page 163). I think this is a particular aspect I would like to explore further.

Sweeney's conclusions are strong. In particular his point that "at its best, evangelicalism functions as a renewal movement within the larger, universal church" (Page 184) should be taken as an exhortation to "stay in" and reform: "Otherwise we will lose our impact on the larger Christian church." (Page 184).

I'm glad I read this book and getting my feet back into the pool of Church History. Sweeney's overview was a good place to begin.

