

ST LUKE'S
EPISCOPAL
CHURCH



The New York Times published an article on Sunday, July 14, authored by Ross Douthat that has created quite a stir, both within our church and in the national arena. His article, entitled “Can Liberal Christianity Be Saved?” is not so much a review of liberal Christianity as it is a pointed attack directed at the Episcopal Church.

Douthat begins by citing retired bishop, Shelby Spong. First, let me say, although Bishop Spong had some important things to say during his tenure as Bishop of Newark, he has in the last decade wandered astray of even the most elemental understanding of what Christianity is. He certainly does not represent the mainstream of the Episcopal Church. For the most part, he doesn't even represent the fringe of the Episcopal Church. Douthat infers that the Episcopal Church is following the leadership of Spong --a bishop who retired 12 years ago. Douthat seems to be picking a fight with the person he thinks he can argue against successfully, rather than a person who best speaks for the church today.

It seems to me that Douthat is guilty of the most obvious “straw man” tactics, in order to make his point; he doesn't like the changes that have come along with liberal Christianity.

Douthat's primary argument is this: the Episcopal Church is so enamored with chasing the secular agenda, that we are dying an obvious, rapid and embarrassing death that everyone can see -- except us. To further simplify his argument, and hopefully highlight the inconsistency of it, he maintains that we so desire to incorporate the popular morals of the day, that we are doomed to be no longer popular. His proof that we have left the path of true Christianity is that our numbers have been in steady decline since the 60s. So, we should abandon our wayward wandering, return to the one true path, which can evidently be determined by taking polls.

By Douthat's own reasoning, Jesus should have abandoned the whole death-on-the-cross-resurrection thing, because he was far more popular -- his polling was far higher -- on Palm Sunday. I am fascinated by the author's desire to use metrics to gauge the authenticity of the church.

I am willing to admit that the church has certainly made some unpopular decisions over the years. The leadership in many individual congregations took strong progressive stances during the civil rights era, and many of those churches, in turn, saw their number steeply decline. They made their decision, not because it was popular but because they believed it to be the path that Christ would desire us to follow. Over the years the church has expanded communion to the laity, translated the bible into the language of the people in the pews, allowed clergy to marry. In the Episcopal Church we expanded ordination to include people of color as well as women. All of these decisions were controversial and caused some people to fall away from the church at the time. Fortunately, we don't decide our course of action on the basis of popularity.

Yes, we are currently debating some controversial and difficult issues in the Episcopal Church. Some of us are weary of the controversy. We are tired of being ridiculed around the water cooler at work. When will it stop? Hopefully, never.

I believe Douthat sees a very different mission for the church. He sees the church at its best when it picks a point in time, decides that is the perfect church, and then fights the battle to never change. Jesus charges his disciples to "go into all the world and preach the Good News." To the Episcopal Church, the great commission from Jesus implies a never ending horizon for the church. We may not grow large, we may not grow in wealth, but we will always struggle to be the church that Jesus Christ is calling us to be in the world right now.

