



# Grant Us Courage: Travels Along the Mainline of American Protestantism

*Randall Balmer*

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In 1950, *Christian Century* ran a series of articles on twelve churches, some large, some small, each representing a strand of American mainline Protestantism. Now, nearly fifty years later, Randall Balmer--author and host of *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, the acclaimed book and PBS series on American evangelicism--has revisited each of these twelve churches to take the pulse of Protestantism today. The result is a remarkable narrative, graced with touches of local color and memorable portraits of the people involved, and filled with deft observations and carefully nuanced insights about Protestantism at century's end. Much as he did in *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, Balmer crisscrosses America to give us a first-hand look at how Christianity has fared in the last half-century. What emerges is a church challenged by diminished influence, but with signs of hope for the future. For instance, he takes us to West Hartford, Connecticut, where we learn how a gregarious pastor, Bob Heppenstall, rekindled the spirit of the First Church of Christ Congregational--still housed in its stately, classic New England meetinghouse--that had suffered from inept management until recent years. And in Ames, Iowa, at the Collegiate United Methodist Church, we watch George White struggle to regain his church's once dominant voice in the religious life of the town, a voice now dimmed by the growth of fundamentalism. Some churches have held steadfastly to long-established roles, such as the Washington Prairie Lutheran Church, in Decorah, Iowa, which has been a model of continuity, serving its Norwegian-American community in much the same way since it was founded in 1851. And Balmer also visits some thriving churches, such as Hollywood's First Presbyterian Church, led by the great preacher John Lloyd Ogilvie, who was recently appointed chaplain of the U.S. Senate. In Minneapolis, Balmer encounters Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, a congregation that has not only increased its membership, but can now call itself the biggest Lutheran church in the world. In *Grant Us Courage*, one of our most thoughtful chroniclers of the American scene offers an intimate look at mainline Protestantism at the close of the century. We come away with the feeling of having been there, of having listened to the voices of an important segment of Christian life, and of having found a deeper understanding of religious life in America today.

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