

Protagonist Corner

"...(and)...the most important is, of course, Staying on the Rails No Matter What."

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Theology is basically a relationship between an intellectual and social environment and a central mystery of the Christian belief-God. Christianity is a universal religion; but theology is a particular enterprise; particular because it means patient and perceptive reflection based on particular and peculiar experience (Idris Hamid, ed., *Troubling the Waters*).

Today when we talk about the future of the church, much is said of the membership boom after WWII. Just about as much time is spent on an analysis of the economic explosion and its lack of morality in the late 70's and 80's. These two events are very important, but, from my perspective in Homer, Louisiana, the definitive event for the present life of the church is Brown vs. Board of Education.

In the naively innocent time before the 1954 Supreme Court decision, there was an operating consensus of understanding of what the ministry of the church was about. The laity loved their ministers. Ministers loved their church. Though there were struggles, they were not as confrontative, brutal nor divisive as today. We knew, as a church, what ecclesiastical life was all about. Our religious tradition was not threatened nor were we threatened by our religious tradition.

With Brown vs. Board of Education we experienced an honest exposure of our sinfulness - whatever part of the country we lived in. This sinfulness called for a life changing repentance. We could not.

The victory in WWII had given us a sense of righteousness. We had triumphed over evil. That righteousness was reinforced by our economic expansion in the marketplace of war-torn Europe and the almost colonial control of sources of raw material and cheap labor in the southern hemisphere and in the Far East. The not so dormant national attitudes of manifest destiny and social Darwinism blossomed in the fertile ground of victory. We misquoted the Puritans. We were the New Israel, and we were now on the right track. What had begun in the Great Awakening and continued in the frontier revivalist days - our saving the world - was now a reality.

During these years after 1945 there were occasional twinges among whites of the endemic sinful problems of racism and economic elitism, such as the treatment of returning Black troops. These twinges were so minor to us whites and everything else was in such good shape we paid no attention to the early warning signs of the disease.

The sinfulness, not the loss of evangelical zeal or biblical fidelity, is the tragic flaw that is now debilitating the church. Our self-proclaimed goodness and our self-authenticated innocence is contradicted not only by the sins of racism and economic elitism but also by the inability to form a consensus to repent bravely of these sins.

How quickly ministers learned they would lose their jobs if they confessed the sins. How quickly sessions, General Assemblies, Conferences, and Dioceses learned they would lose money if they repented of the sins. How quickly congregations learned they could maintain their statistics if they opened an alternative to the public school system. How quickly program managers learned the success of homogeneous exclusivity and therapists learned adapting is better business than repentance. How

quickly we all learned to cut each other's throats and stab each other in the back.

Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, years later we still suffer from not being able to confess ourselves as the racists we are or to recognize how enslaved we are by the economic elitism that controls the country. Those of our brothers and sisters who leave such denominations as the Presbyterian Church (USA) still mention attempts at repentance made long years ago as reasons for their decision to leave. All the complaints are variations on the old theme.

Like a low-grade fever imperceptibly drains one's strength, so the persistent sins of racism and economic elitism drain the goodwill, the good sense of community, and the transcendent understanding of the church from us. We can no longer deal with issues from a consensus of what the church is about. There is not one crucial issue, either ecclesiastical or social that the church can now deal with without the destructive, conflictive influence of these sins. The brutal battle over human sexuality is a good example. There is no chance for a serious, public theological debate on the issue. The battle lines were drawn long ago - in reaction to 1954.

Under this cultural influence the ministry deals with the crisis by trying to survive. Not that faithfulness has disappeared but rather survival has become the proof of faithfulness.

The clearest manifestation of the survival mode is the demand by theological education, the bureaucracy, and the local church that ministers must be managers and therapists rather than the traditional prophet, priest, and ruler. The liberated role of the reformed minister becomes the role of pastor controlled by the institutional need to survive. The institutional church calls her pastors to tend the structures rather than minister in the movement of the Kingdom of God.

The manager/therapist model is one that everyone can understand. There is a consensus as to the functions: build and manage buildings and programs, never call for repentance and a new way of life; rather offer Orwellian adjustment to cultural functionality. What is lost is the sharp alternative of the Kingdom of God. What is lost is the Ambassadors of Reconciliation. What is lost is the salt and the leaven. What is lost is an openness to the excitement of the abundant life (John 10:10).

The emphasis and requirement of the manager/therapist limits the ministry to the functions of society. These limited functions effectively block the freedom of the ministry in the reformed tradition that produced ministers who were also archaeologists, botanists, poets, artists, and village school teachers. Jonathan Edwards and his openness and love of creation is perhaps the premier example.

The issue before the ministry today in the church is how to remain close enough to the cultural church to speak to it, yet far enough away not to be controlled by it. (I exclude from this ministry those who now serve in manager/therapist positions, who have very recently in the history of the church been elevated to political power and high salaries by the growing bureaucracy of the church.)

The problem is best defined by Gertrude Crampton's book *Tootle*. This book was given to me, at an early age, by my parents because of my love of trains. The book contains great existential sadness. It is a story of suppression of the enjoyment of life by the system and was an important personal lesson about freedom. Tootle wanted to be a Flyer, an engine that pulls a prestigious passenger train. The managers and therapists in Lower Trainswitch worked very hard to teach him the lessons.

...Whistle Blowing, Stopping for a Red Flag Waving, Puffing Loudly When Starting, Coming Around Curves Safely, Screeching When Stopping, and Clicking

and Clacking Over the Rails...(and)...the most important, of course, Staying on the Rails No Matter What.

How sad. Then one day, "...Tootle played all day in the meadow. He watched a green frog and he made a daisy chain. He found a rain barrel...." What joy and freedom. But it was unacceptable to the institution of town and school. So, they all got together and brutalized Tootle, with red flags among the daisies and by the rain barrel, back onto the track.

In his old age he would tell the young locomotives, "Work Hard. Always remember to Stop for Red Flag Waving. But most of all, Stay on the Rails No Matter What." He said nothing to the young locomotives about the joy of the meadow, of daisies and rain barrels.

I can remember the sinking feeling in my heart when that last page was read to me. The question still remains: how does one be a flyer on the rails of the world and still make daisy chains in the meadows of the Kingdom of God?

We need to recapture the freeing definition of minister of the Reformation. No longer should we function on the narrow track of the pastor/manager/therapist but rather live in the joyful meadow experience of the minister/prophet/priest/ruler.

If life is one of God's jokes, will we be willing to work as hard to make it a good one as we work to make it a bad one? (correspondence between Leo Tolstoy and George Bernard Shaw in Jay Parini, *The Last Station*).