

Protagonist Corner

The Church: Visible but Silent

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An observer from afar of the American scene — who is aware both of the prophetic voice that the church has historically had in American society and of the present pain in the nation's life — wonders about the following questions:

—where are the disciples of the Niebuhrs, Martin Luther King, and the myriads of other modern prophets of American church history?

—what happens to students of the like of Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Wesley, after ordination?

This writer remembers hearing an experienced and ambitious member of the political directorate of his own country in the turbulent seventies speak of the sensitivity of his colleagues to proposing legislation that might raise the ire of certain spokespersons of the churches. He knew very well how costly it could be for holders of political office if any policy decision provoked certain preachers and church leaders to take the issue to the people from pulpit or platform, or to call upon the people to take to the streets in protest.

Of course, while this was happening in one place in that region, in another there was a situation where, from deep fears rooted in myths about differences of race, clan, and religion, erstwhile Christian prophets either had their lips sealed or spoke only words of support to Caesar, even when harsh words of caution or condemnation were what the moment demanded.

Nowhere in the world is the Christian church more visible than in the United States. There is an imposing multipurpose church structure on nearly every corner lot in every city. In fact, even commercial and school buildings manifest the pervasiveness of Christianity in the culture. In addition, church business management is certainly far more developed in the U.S. than anywhere else; and understandably so, since there have to be adequate financial resources to meet the payments for multiple staffs and the maintenance of elaborate physical plants and immaculately manicured premises.

Attention to matters of architecture, finance, and personnel at the parish level is matched by that given to the formation of persons to serve highly complex parish and denominational bureaucracies. Nowhere else in Christendom is as much attention given to curriculum development as in the United States. One has only to glance through the catalogue of a typical theological seminary to see how much is done continuously to ensure that those who go out to serve the churches at various levels meet the expectations of those who hire them, while experiencing fulfillment as persons and professionals.

Those who lead and manage the affairs of seminaries and divinity schools not only know how to tap intellectual management and technological resources needed for curriculum development and implementation, but also how to access financial resources for doing so. The budgets of these institutions allow for the procurement of up-to-date educational technology, the hiring of highly equipped faculty, and the exposure of those in training to the various types of contexts in which the church is challenged to serve and witness.

In the light of the foregoing observations on the reality of the Christian presence in America, it is mystifying to an overseas visitor that what is happening to the human condition in this country can be taking place with a church so resourceful, but apparently doing so little by way of public witness.

What makes a church that is so resourceful do so little in the name of the God of the Old Testament prophets, the one whom Christians proclaim as the God whose righteousness is so uncompromising, and whose sovereignty and love are so manifest in the teachings, suffering, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus the Christ?

The observant Christian visitor who attends worship services in a variety of churches is tempted to attribute what appears to be the ineptitude of the witness of the American church to a number of things.

First of all, in many churches there appears to be too wide a disparity between what is taught in theological institutions in areas like Bible, ethics, systematic theology, and homiletics, and what is preached and taught in the churches by graduates of these institutions.

One listens in vain in the typical mainline worship service for evidence of awareness of the principles of biblical interpretation of the prophetic responsibility of the ministry. In too many churches of the Reformed tradition, there seems to be a loss of the sense of the centrality of the word of God in the life and witness of the church.

Second, there seems to be too much innocence in both pulpit and pew about the political, economic, and social reality of the world around the church; the world in which members of the church earn their living, pay tribute to Caesar, and interact with fellow human beings at places of work, play, and the confrontation of pain and tragedy. Worship services seem so long on social commentary, plans for fun times and socializing, and so short on the application of the *Word* to the realities of a world in which the *Word* became flesh in order that God's people might be redeemed for God.

Third, there seems to be too much emphasis on the celebration of the American way of life and the sovereignty of America, and too little on challenging the people of God in America to understand and live out their calling as part of the Church Catholic. American churches appear to have forgotten that they are inheritors of the roles of the martyrs of the faith, not only in the ages of the apostles and reformers, but also in the history of the church in America.

Fourth, there seems to be too little awareness of the painful realities of the life on the global scene as is manifest in the increasing incidence of starvation, uprootedness, and attendant homelessness; in civil strife with its attendant wanton destitution of human life; in the fatalization of poor people in the countries of the global South and the cities of the global North; in the exploitation of peoples with weaker economies by powerful trans-national corporations; and in the woeful waste of the resources of the earth, both by the irresponsible wealthy and the innocent poor.

Finally, while the contemporary emphasis on the therapeutic aspect of ministry in the curriculum of the theological seminary deserves to be underscored and commended, it might enhance the effectiveness of the ministry of the church in contemporary America and the witness of the American church in the wider world, if those who lead the churches 1) put more emphasis on the public ministry of the church and 2) restore the reading and the exposition of the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to the place given to them in the preaching of the reformers and the witness of mothers and fathers of the history of the church in America. It must not

be forgotten by those entrusted with the ministry of the word that, because there are always Pharaohs, Ahab's, Davids, Nebuchadnezzars, and Herods around, there must always be the Moseses, Elijahs, Nathans, Daniels, and John the Baptists to declare: "Thus saith the Lord," "Let my people go," and "The day of the Lord is near."

As of now, the church in America is very visible. The state of the world around it demands that its voice become more audible, in order that the victims of the moment may have hope.