

Protagonist Corner

Easter's Point of View

D. Cameron Murchison, Jr.
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Easter invites us to see everything from a different point of view. More specifically, Paul in 2 Corinthians suggests because Christ has died and been raised: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way" (2 Cor 5:16 NRSV). Echoes of this Easter point of view can be heard in three important and persuasive analyses of the contemporary setting of the church in North America that are current among us. These perspectives entail urgent questions about the practice of ministry in the North American church, and they offer some of the most important perspectives that can help the church live as God's Easter people.

I

The first of these analyses aims a *wide-angle lens* at the larger world in which the North American church lives, moves, and has its being. It is typified by a sharpened awareness of population changes that impact everything, not excepting the church. One aspect of these population changes has to do with ethnic diversity and another has to do with generational differences. The analysis calls for a serious engagement with the coming majority presence of African-Americans, Latinos, and Asians, as well as with the already majority presence of boomers and x-ers in the society. In particular, questions arise about a churchly life and mission based on the habits, styles, and values of predominantly European ethnic groups and on the habits, styles, and values of earlier generations.

The correction offered to our ordinary point of view about the church is obvious. This lens provides us with a peripheral vision too often absent. It refuses to let us pretend that just because we do not see ethnic diversity in our particular congregations we are unaffected by the growing pluralism of our culture. It helps us see not only that future development of churches will have to be intentional about racial and cultural diversity, but that our own current communal, congregational, and personal lives are enormously influenced by these realities now—often in surprisingly gracious ways. Thereby it describes some of the contours and context of life and mission in particular church communities.

Similarly, this point of view refuses to leave our vision clouded about the meaning of the "graying" of the church. While we may be so used to seeing each other in the worship and service of our congregations that we often fail to notice who is not present, the peripheral corrective provided by this lens relentlessly reminds us that several generations of North America are conspicuous by their absence. To fail to look at the church in our context with such awareness would be to bury our heads in the proverbial sand. But it is an Easter point of view that provides both courage and insight for living authentically as God's missionary people.

II

Another analysis of this North American setting employs a *long-range lens* to show how in the grand sweep of Christian history a threshold has been reached. As the church in North America (as well as elsewhere) crosses this threshold, it moves from a position of social privilege and importance to a place closer to the margins of the life of the larger society. Christendom is disappearing, according to this analysis, and the church is becoming progressively disestablished.

Whereas its ministry and mission previously proceeded from a position of cultural strength and social prominence, crossing this threshold disestablishes the church in dramatic ways. A church that pursues its vocation under the assumptions of Christendom is a living anachronism. The resultant challenge for the church is to rediscover how to live out its life in a way appropriate to the threshold it has crossed.

This long-range point of view provides a corrective to that perspective which looks at immediate churchly circumstances in a favorable setting without noticing how drastically everything has changed. There are still prominent church edifices all over town. Many of them are packed for various kinds of activities more than one hour a week. But this point of view shows us that while the form of Christendom may continue in some settings, its substance is virtually gone. The life of the world beyond the private, personal, and familial—including the public, economic, and political life of church members—marches to a different drumbeat than “We’re Marching to Zion.” There is, of course, an important question of whether Christendom was not itself an inherent dilution of the Christian reality from the beginning, as the larger frames of cultural life subsumed and engulfed the distinctively Christian ones. Nonetheless, Christendom did offer an allegedly Christian frame of reference to encompass all domains of life. Our post-Christendom point of view makes us aware that we have become content with the privatized version of the gospel.

III

Yet a third analysis proceeds with a *close-up lens* whereby it peers into the wasted souls of the denizens of North American culture. There it finds “hungry hearts” yearning for palpable experience with a lively, non-routinized God. This hungering and thirsting for “something more” than formal ritual unreflectively practiced, and churchly busy-ness thoughtlessly replicated, challenges churches committed to “decency and good order.” The widespread embrace of “spirituality” in both focused and diffuse ways challenges the church in its mission and ministry to move beyond form to genuine substance, beyond guardianship of cultural conventions to sponsorship of divine-human encounter, beyond church activity to human and divine engagement.

This close-up lens corrects our point of view when we too quickly take comfort because our congregations have neither neo-charismatics nor New-Agers disturbing their equilibrium. It suggests that we are embodying spiritual values in a context where there is no dearth of alternatives and that we do well to take our traditions of spirituality with fresh seriousness, from our public worship to our private devotions. As Annie Dillard said, we ought to be wearing crash helmets in worship and asking the ushers to lash us to the pews.¹

All three of these points of view are subsumed in the widely acknowledged postmodern reality in which North America lives, along with much of the rest of the

world. For example, the wide-angle view of shifting demographics, ethnically and generationally, illustrates the current awareness of radical and irreducible pluralism. Further, the long-range view that shows us crossing the threshold from Christendom into disestablishment is yet another manifestation of the irretrievable loss of cultural hegemony and social metanarrative. And the immersion in spirituality signifies the inability of forms of knowing to be tightly controlled by any privileged epistemology, such as a so-called “scientific” worldview.

Significantly, these points of view can be received not merely as threats but as Easter perceptions. They can be received as points of view that are not the stuff of the obvious and everyday worlds we mostly inhabit but rather the stuff of the strange appearance of life where we thought death had ruled. And when received this way they engender theological resources important for the church living in the midst of these forceful currents. Such resources include: mission conceived in a cross-cultural perspective; a biblical theology of exile; a cruciform ecclesiology; and a theology of the Spirit in the transformation of human life. Such theological resources as these are the gifts of Easter’s point of view to the North American church in the present.

Note

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 40.