

PROTAGONIST CORNER

The Church and Controversy or Why Trouble Ourselves?

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It goes without saying that the church exists in a world filled with controversy. Cries for freedom, justice, and for human rights . . . in areas social, political, economic, as well as religious . . . fill our consciousness. More often than not competing sides of the controversies seek our allegiance and support. The material that crosses my desk weekly on abortion . . . capital punishment . . . prison injustices . . . women's rights . . . homosexuality . . . race relations . . . boycotts . . . arms reduction . . . atomic energy . . . and child abuse boggles the mind while often depressing the spirit. Today, just keeping up with the issues at stake in these controversies is a full time job.

Given the controversies, the question is what role should we in the church be playing in this cacophony of human voices?

One response would be just to ignore the whole mess! We could cover our ears and shut our eyes to the chaos that exists around us. We could concentrate on "spiritual things"--Bible study, prayer groups, visiting the sick, communion and baptism, marrying and burying. We could thus make the church into an island of concord surrounded by a sea of discord. We could provide precious relief from everything controversial by simply concentrating exclusively on the non-controversial agenda of our work.

This "hear no evil, see no evil" response can be defended as the pragmatic one. After all, we in the church have paid dearly whenever we have ventured forth into the seas of controversy. We have paid through the loss of membership, diminished financial support, and congregational splits. Still, as inviting as this kind of response seems to our weary minds and hearts, we must ask ourselves, is it faithful? I, for one, think not!

As troublesome as it may be, our faith is that in Christ God has entered our human affairs and the history of our world, gathering a people into His work as witnesses and co-workers. The standards of righteousness, freedom, justice, and mercy revealed to us through scripture are received not merely as information, but as evidence of God's grace and as an expression of His will for our salvation. These standards are not offered as a blueprint for some life in the bye and bye--they apply now. It is our responsibility as the church to seek to walk by these standards . . . and to inform the controversies of our age by these standards.

We as the church have "God given" contributions to make to controversies that challenge humanity. Before we can make these contributions, however, we must do our homework. We must listen and study so as to understand the issues that are at stake. We must study and apply the insights derived from our faith. Then we should respond humbly with word and deed. In short the church must be involved in controversy.

To accept this more involved posture does not mean that we believe that as the church we are incapable of error. We know that we are. Neither does it mean

that we expect to speak with a unified voice. I gave up on that a long time ago! Good Christians, it has been my experience, can be found on opposing sides of most life issues. "Well," you say, "if we can't expect agreement, and we can't expect always to be right, why trouble ourselves in the first place?"

I believe we trouble ourselves in order to be faithful! We trouble ourselves in the faith that God is alive and working through His people for the redemption of the world. I believe, further, we trouble ourselves in the faith that, after all is said and done, God is with us. Successful or unsuccessful, right or wrong, that we have attempted to be obedient affirms our faith in God's grace, God's purpose, and God's control. Finally, I believe we trouble ourselves in the faith that what holds us together is stronger than anything that can divide us. Though divided by most controversial issues (as is the rest of the world), we as the church affirm, through the courage of our voluntary involvement, that the love of Christ which binds us together is stronger than all the cumulative forces that divide us.

To summarize then: When I see the church take a stand on a controversial issue such as abortion, I do not hear the church saying, "Listen to us, we are infallible!" . . . and I do not hear the church saying, "All of us Christians view this issue this way!" All of us Christians don't see everything the same way.

What I do see in such instances is this . . . I see the church affirming her faith that God is alive and actively caring and working through His people for the salvation of humanity. I also see the church, knowing that while the best of such efforts is subject to error, affirming its faith in God's forgiveness by having the courage to speak out. We risk being wrong in an effort to be God's obedient people.

Finally, I hear the church speaking and I see it taking a stand even though a sizable minority in its own ranks may disagree . . . as our faith affirmation that the God who joined us together is stronger than any of the issues that divide us. In such affirmations, and in such models of action, there is seen the hope of the world--the living, active, forgiving, reconciling God revealed in Christ our Lord.