

Protagonist Corner

Pessimism or Hope?

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In his book *Brother to A Dragonfly*, Will Campbell likened the church to an Easter chicken. The Easter chick is of purple hue but as it tries to associate with the other chickens, it experiences persecution and ostracism. Because of its strange color, an Easter chicken is pecked into isolation. When it begins to sprout feathers, it still looks different, but is well on the way to looking like all the other chickens. Finally, except for the purple ring around its neck, it begins to act the way the other chickens act. The density of the Easter chicken is to take on the ways and values of the others.

This story points to some disturbing trends of the church and ministry today. The signs are quite obvious and well known that both have accommodated themselves to many of the expectations of the surrounding culture. Rather than daring to be different, the church has reinforced the prevailing cultural values. For example, the clergy often finds itself in the uneasy role of “cheerleader” or “promoter” after the style of the Chamber of Commerce. The success idol in America pervades the ministry as seen in the career ladder from small church to large church, from small salary to larger salary. A recent pamphlet advertising a church-growth seminar listed the guest ministers in order of the size of their respective congregations as if a certain sense of virtue and prominence were to be equated with size. How often does a church find itself evaluating its “success” at the end of the year by the number added, or deleted, from the church roll! Search committees sometimes prioritize the ministers they will consider according to the statistical data of growth by numbers.

Richard Niebuhr’s classical typology of the “Christ and culture” helps to describe our dilemma today. Though we live within the Reformed tradition, we find that we are hard pressed to define ourselves as truly the “transformers of culture.” It is much easier to see ourselves identifying with the “Christ of culture” motif. To borrow James Smart’s phrase, there is indeed a ‘cultural subversion’ of the church.

Certainly the above diagnosis of the present day ministry and church could be quite disheartening because we have a vision of what church and ministry could be. We live between the “is” and the “not yet” and our vision and hope of what could be always makes us uncomfortable with what is—and it should. We cannot totally resolve that tension on our own power. Nevertheless, simply to analyze and complain about the church’s shortcomings is a cop-out theologically and is personally irresponsible. It is to share in the same cultural pessimism of the society which we so often attack. It is, in fact, a reenforcement of the “Christ of culture” motif.

Loving the church means not only that we are able to see her faults and be

prophetically critical when her life fails to match her affirmations, but also that we emphasize those areas of strength where the church has made and can make a major impact upon people and society. Loving the church means that we emphasize what's *right* with the church; we underline the tremendous possibilities it has for changing lives of people and the structures of society. The church not only has suffered a failure of nerve but also a failure of hope. We have acted sometimes as if the sovereignty of God would not be able to prevail over our little mistakes. Therefore we have not risked much failure nor lived much hope.

The local church is still that unique place in our society where the opportunities for dealing with life and death questions are unparalleled. The local pastor has more influence than the pastor often thinks. For example, the necessity and potential for responsible preaching and teaching is almost overwhelming. To try to shed some light on the mystery and meaning of human life and to challenge people to respond to the radical call of Christ are awesome tasks that cannot be taken lightly. We never know the impact of our words in peoples' lives. Our culture likes instant coffee, instant replays, instant gratification. The ministry, however, cannot and should not expect instant and tangible gratification for its work. If we do, we had better re-examine what we're doing.

Among other opportunities the church has is that of enabling both intimate and disciplined fellowship to take place. People hunger for community and yet so often find purely secular groupings empty. What some churches are doing in this area is commendable and the possibilities are numerous both in new church development and within established churches.

Certainly, the impact the church has had on the local and larger community is notable despite a checkered history. Church people attending city council meetings and going to court houses and jails have had an influence in terms of personal and social justice and compassion that many other groups have never had. We have not even tapped this area of witness and response.

Concern for world hunger usually begins with local problems of poverty. The involvement of some churches and presbyteries in this area, even though just a dent, points again to the vitality and possibility of the church if it takes its mission seriously.

To complain about the church and the "identity crisis" of ministry is too easy. Surely we have been subverted by our culture in ways that we do not even recognize. But these questions remain: Are we going to bow down to the current gods of our culture—even pessimism—and allow the church to become another promoter of the status-quo? Or, are we going to proclaim and live out our hope for the church as God's channel of radical humanity? Shall we live by pessimism or by hope and courage?