

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

Vol. 2, No. 8

The Vanishing Ecclesiology

In *Serious Times*, I noted that Christianity used to be rejected by Enlightenment intellectuals because they thought its central beliefs had been disproven by an unchanging and universal truth, meaning science or philosophy, but that today, Christianity tends to be disqualified on the grounds that it argues that an unchanging and universal truth even exists. In other words, a particular faith used to be wrong on the basis of what one perceived to *be* truth; now a faith is wrong for claiming there *is* such a thing.

A shift with interesting parallels is occurring in regard to ecclesiology. Traditional forms of church used to be rejected because they were outdated, archaic and irrelevant, or going back to the Reformation, because a particular form or ecclesial idea was found wanting in light of New Testament understandings. But the idea of church *itself* - not simply the church universal, but the church local - was never rejected. Now the very idea of a local church owning a rightful piece of the kingdom economy is being challenged.

I will not bother to name names or movements, but with renewed vigor pockets within the evangelical world are taking the idea of church to task. Simply put, the doctrine of ecclesiology is being radically revised apart from biblical moorings, or being dismissed as if not a part of biblical orthodoxy at all.

This should not surprise observers of American Evangelicalism, for it is a movement that has been weak on the doctrine of the church from its beginning. Note Carl F.H. Henry's monumental systematic theology. Six volumes, and not a single section on the church. Or in the name of fair play, consider the institution for which I am President-Elect, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, arguably the academic flagship of the evangelical world, where there is not a single course which is wholly devoted to the doctrine of the church (though it is embedded in the content of Systematic Theology).

Then there is the parachurch movement. Originally embraced as a way to enlarge the boundaries of God's work beyond the traditional church, for many it has become a substitute entity; often competitive, and occasionally antagonistic. The role of the parachurch has loomed so large in

some thinking that it has led some to speak of the “potential” partnership of the church and parachurch, as if it might be a nice option.

Yet as famed missiologist Lesslie Newbigin once wrote, “I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation...Jesus...did not write a book but formed a community.”

Few would disagree with this statement, but they then feel the freedom to define “community” in any way they desire. They fail to note that in the Bible, this “community” had definition and form, structure and purpose. It was not simply “community” in the broadest of senses, but a gathering with defined entry and exit points, theology, sacraments, leadership, and mission. For the Christian, it was the church that afforded the confession of the gospel through proclamation; corporate worship; the stewarding of the sacraments; the dynamics of the new community in Christ; the use of, and benefit from, spiritual gifts; and spiritual care and protection through pastors. The most common reference in the Bible to the church is not the church universal representing the wide communion of saints, though that is certainly at hand, but the church *local* representing defined gatherings of believers with an intent and order informed by direct apostolic instruction.

So penetrating was this understanding at the beginning of the Christian movement that it led the early church father Tertullian to maintain “it is not possible to have God as Father without having the Church as mother.” And it will take just this entity, biblically defined and then realized, to impact the world.

And, if needed, to salvage it.

In 410, after the sacking of Rome, western culture fell. A robust ecclesiology stood ready to fill the gap, and it served the world for the next thousand years, providing the social glue needed for culture to regain its footing throughout the middle ages.

Now, Western culture is falling again through moral decay.

But this time the West may look for the church to stand in the gap, and find that we have no sense of church to which we can turn.

James Emery White

Sources

Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*.

Willmer, Schmidt and Smith, *The Prospering Parachurch*.

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

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