

The Church: A Non-Prophet Organization?

BY J. RANDALL O'BRIEN

From Jesus' teachings, where conventional wisdom is turned upside down, we glean unsettling lessons: alleged believers are not necessarily safe on the Day of Judgment, for genuine devotion to Christ lies in the practice of His lordship, not merely the profession of it. The church needs prophets of God to call people to repentance.

Lamenting liberal theology, Richard Niebuhr once issued the satirical critique, "A God without wrath brought man without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without a cross." Anything goes; everything is beautiful; we'll all be with Jesus in the sweet bye-and-bye. Such thinking, which Niebuhr passionately ridiculed, runs blatantly counter to the teaching of Scripture.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name ...?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:21-23, NASB).¹

The Spirit moves beyond individuals to warn churches in The Revelation to John: "To the angel of the church in Sardis write, ... 'I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead.... Wake up, ... and repent. If you do not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you'" (3:1-3).

Among the many lessons that we may glean from these passages, several jump off the page. Conventional wisdom is turned upside down. Alleged believers in Christ are not necessarily safe and secure on Judgment Day. The proof of genuine devotion to Christ, furthermore, lies in the practice of His lordship, not merely the profession of it. Either the individual or the local church, or both, may be deemed false in the sight of God, who will hold them accountable.

How will churches, or true versus false believers, be identified? "You will know them by their fruits," Jesus explains. "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" he queries (Matthew 7:16). Yet, precisely what are the criteria by which judgment comes? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself," Jesus admonishes, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). The writer of 1 John adds, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars" (1 John 4:20).

In these verses the word translated "love" derives from the Greek verb *agapao*, which means to love without conditions. "Beloved, if God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). Judgment comes to those who sin by refusing to love God and neighbor unconditionally. Since indeed "a God with wrath brings humans with sin into judgment," the church needs prophets of God who will call people to repentance.

THE CHURCH'S CALLING

Although the day of Pentecost has been called the birthday of the church, her true beginnings must be traced to the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "We know that our old self was crucified with him.... Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:6 and 4).

Paul Minear identifies ninety-six analogies of the church in the New Testament, including these three major images: the people of God, the new creation, and the body of Christ.² As the *people of God*, the church is holy. Both Hebrew and Greek terms for holy mean "to be different," or "to be set apart." The church, as the people of God, is called to be different than the world; it is set apart *from* the world and *to* the work of God. The Greek word for church, *ecclesia*, means "called out" (or "called out ones"). The church consists of those called out of the world to serve Christ. These servants of Christ form a spiritual community dependent upon the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by the apostolic benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the *communion* of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13:13). Communion (*koinonia*) here means fellowship or community. Elsewhere Paul would write of the "fellowship of His sufferings" (Philippians 3:10, NASB): the cross is the mode of fellowship and

the model of holiness in the community inhabited by the people of God. Jesus urged, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). The church is a cross community.

The holy people of God, in community, are a *new creation*. "So, if any one is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away;

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see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Interestingly, the Greek text contains neither subject nor verb before the phrase "new creation." A literal reading suggests, "If any one is in Christ, new creation!" As Richard B. Hays notes, the verse speaks of much more than an individual, subjective

conversion experience. Rather the old world of sin has given way to a new world of life in Christ. The believer has entered into a new creation community.³

The holy people of God are a new creation community constituting the *body of Christ*. "Now you are the body of Christ," Paul writes to the saints at Corinth, "and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Christ is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18). Yet the church, as his body, is the visual form of Christ in the world today!

THE PROPHET'S ROLE

The Hebrew word for prophet, *Nabi'*, originally meant "to bubble forth," like a spring of water. The term appears 300 times in the Old Testament. Two other terms, which mean "to see," as in seer, occur a total of 23 times. A prophet might see a vision from God, and then relate it to the people; he or she would "bubble forth" on behalf of God.

Prophecy arose in Israel in conjunction with the monarchy. Unlike pagan prophets in neighboring nations, the Hebrew prophets usually held the king accountable for his actions. As Yahweh's representative ruler, the monarch was expected to insure justice and righteousness in the land, for the LORD is a God of justice (Isaiah 30:18). Failure to govern justly brought condemnation (Jeremiah 22:13, 15, 16). Prophets such as Micaiah ben Imlah (2 Chronicles 18:25-26), Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah fiercely cried out against abuses of power, social injustice, greed, idolatry, and other sins. They boldly critiqued king, society, and religion. Thus the role of the prophet was, and is, to speak for God. As Abraham Heschel explains, through the prophet the invisible God becomes audible.

THE 'NON-PROPHET' CHURCH

Bertrand Russell, the noted British philosopher and Nobel Prize winner for literature, famously observed, "The teaching of Christ, as it appears in the Gospels, has had extraordinarily little to do with the ethics of Christians." He lamented that instead of being delivered from evil, Christians frequently have been extremely wicked. He cited the Inquisition and witch burnings, then added, "You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world."⁴

Is Russell right? If so, where have all the prophets gone? Is there no Amos to condemn social injustice, widespread immorality, greed, and reliance upon military might? Is there no Hosea to rail against idolatry, the worship of false gods, and spiritual adultery? Is there no Micaiah ben Imlah to confront the highest political figures on the abomination of reliance upon force to solve conflict? Is there no Micah to prophesy of the hammering of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, to cry out for the exercise of justice, mercy, and humility? Is there no Isaiah to dream of peace, when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb?" Where have all the prophets gone?

The biblical story consists of four major movements: creation, corruption, correction, and consummation. God has created a good world; humans and spiritual powers have sinned, do sin, and will sin, thus making a mess of this world, now fallen; God entered into covenant with Israel to begin to correct this fallen world, whose correction ultimately occurs in and through the cross of Jesus Christ and the creation of the church; and the Bible promises in the eschatological vision of a new heaven and new earth that God's will prevails and becomes the final reality.

Here is the problem: the world supplies the corruption; the church, in Christ, provides the correction, allegedly. The rub comes when the witness of the church is like that of the world. As Billy Graham puts it, "It's okay for the boat to be in the water; but if the water gets in the boat, you've got a problem. The church should be in the world, not the reverse."

George Barna distinguishes among biblical, conventional, or cultural Christians.⁵ The first places total trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, desires

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to grow spiritually, orders life according to faith principles, and holds to moral absolutes. The second variety trusts in Christ for salvation, only vaguely brings faith to bear on life issues, and views morality as relative. The third describes a person who is Christian in name and perhaps heritage only, and subscribes to moral relativism. Only ten percent of Americans classify themselves as biblical Christians. In light of this analysis of

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the church, one can easily see how “the water might get in the boat.”

The doctrine of the Fall is imperative in helping to define humankind and its institutions. Essentially put, God created

humankind good, but all have chosen to sin. As a result the world is sinful, broken, and fallen. Moreover, since sin is pervasive, institutions, as well as individuals, are fallen. There must be a new creation, which only Christ can bring about (2 Corinthians 5:17-19). Who will sound the call to repentance?

Of course, justification and sanctification are past, present, and future realities. A Christian has been justified (saved), is being justified, and ultimately will be justified. A believer has been sanctified (made holy, different), is being sanctified, and ultimately will be sanctified. In the meantime, the gulf between the ideal and the real is problematic. Dorothy Day, the Catholic social activist of yesteryear, complained that the clergy and church often are more like Cain than Abel, asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Critics of the church, both within and outside, charge she is loudly silent on a host of issues that are on the agenda of the world: racism, materialism, sexism, militarism, homosexuality, abortion, doctor-assisted suicide, premarital sex, presidential ethics, capital punishment, homelessness, situational ethics, care for the poor, distributive justice, divorce, corporate corruption, drugs (including alcohol and tobacco), the lottery, nuclear weapons, war, medical ethics, greed, and many more. Where have all the prophets gone?

Consider just a few of the galaxy of issues facing the church and world today. According to a World Bank study, three billion people live on less than two dollars a day, while 1.3 billion of those exist on less than one dollar a day. A staggering 34,000 children die every day of hunger and preventable diseases.⁶ Should the church address this plague of death? Does God have anything to say to us?

The percentage of Americans viewing premarital sex as wrong dropped from 68% in 1969 to 39% in 1996, according to Gallup polls. In the 18-29 age group, 74% believe premarital sex is acceptable.⁷ Almost half of all babies

born in 1992 to Baby Busters (those born between 1965-1983) were to unmarried mothers.⁷ Should the church share a word from God regarding the gift of sexuality?

What might the Prince of Peace have to say about our determination to wage war? “WWJK?” – Who would Jesus kill? How are Christians to think about war, abortion, and capital punishment? What about gender equality? Will the church be the last bastion of male supremacy, as some predict? Why is 11:00 on Sunday morning the most segregated hour in America? Why does the church suffer from laryngitis in the face of a serpentine line of moral issues confronting church and society? Why are God’s speakers speechless? Do the people of God desire to hear from God, speak for God, live for God?

Isaiah declared of Judah, “They are a rebellious people ... who say to the seers, ‘Do not see’; and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions’” (Isaiah 30:9-10). Micah accused the priests and prophets of being “prophets for profit.” Judah’s “priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money,” and they “cry ‘peace’ when they have something to eat” (Micah 3:5, 11). Jesus strongly denounced phony religion, crying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe ... [but] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23).

Amos mocked and condemned Israel: “Come to Bethel—and transgress ... for so you love to do, O people of Israel” (Amos 4:4-5). Bethel means “house of God.” Although we can draw parallels between eighth-century Israel and twenty-first-century America, the correct comparison lies with God’s people then and now. Amos believed Israel’s going to worship was going to sin! He accused Israel of caring more about rites than rights, more about religion than relationships. God despises worship, the prophet preached, unless it results in just and righteous treatment of others (Amos 5:21-24).

Jesus clearly taught that love of God and neighbor are required and will be judged; that whatever we do to each other, we do to him (Matthew 25). So with each of the moral issues of our day that center on our relationships with God and neighbor: should the church fall silent, or should she speak? Should our conduct, values, and witness be distinguishable or indistinguishable from the world? Clarence Jordan once grieved, “We will worship the hind legs off Jesus, then not lift a finger to do a single thing he says.” “Christianity must have a marvelous inherent power,” Leslie Weatherhead wrote, “or the churches would have killed it long ago.”

GOD’S GOAL FOR THE CHURCH

Salvation, guidance (on justice and love), judgment, repentance, grace, and hope must define the church. Persons must be *transformed* by Christ; believers must be *taught* God’s Word; *judgment* must be pronounced when-

ever persons sin against God and neighbor; *repentance* must be encouraged; *grace* from Jesus Christ must be offered; *hope* for God's Kingdom come must be embraced. The goal for the church is the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Life by God's design is to be lived in fellowship with God and in community with neighbor, wherein each person is regarded with dignity and fairness. Any diminution of dignity or respect for one created in the image of God counts as sin. To do justice as God commands is to make the needy

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whole, to bring the oppressed to dignified participation in the community (Deuteronomy 10:18; Proverbs 21:3; Isaiah 1:17, 56:1; Jeremiah 22:2-3, 15-16; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:8), and to live in a right relationship with God and neighbor.

Lewis Smedes argues that there are two moral absolutes: *justice* and *love*. By justice he means being fair; by love he means being helpful to one in need. The words echo throughout scripture, where justice is to the Old Testament what love is to the New: the standard for measuring God's rule in the hearts of God's people.

The church is what God is "up to" in our world. It is, as Hays claims, an eschatological beachhead, which God establishes on our soil. As such it is a glimpse of what God has in mind for all of us. *God is re-creating the world through Christ*. Therefore, the prophet today must call us to be who we are: a new creation! Here all baptized persons are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). In this new creation, compassion replaces domination, love displaces evil, and Jesus—not Cain, Caesar, mammon, or self—is Lord!

What to do then with the haunting indictment, pronounced by Romano Guardini, "The church is the cross on which Christ is crucified?"

Surely Bonhoeffer is right. The last word with Christ, when He gets His way, is grace. Yet, as the twentieth-century martyr reminds us, we cannot speak the last word until we have spoken the next-to-last word. True, the last word is "grace." But the next-to-last word is "guilty." Are we not all guilty of misrepresenting Christ? Do we not each stand in danger of judgment and in need of Christ's grace? The true prophet of God says so. Where have all the prophets gone?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

In thinking about the prophetic role of the church, I find Walter Rauschenbusch's work quite helpful: *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, and *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and Walter Wink's *Engaging the*

Powers are both stimulating and provocative. Lewis Smedes is always worth reading; his *Mere Morality* and *Choices: Making Right Decisions in a Complex World* offer his usual lucid, logical insight. Abraham Heschel's two volume work, *The Prophets*, benefited me greatly.

NOTES

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2 Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (The Westminster Press, 1960).

3 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 20.

4 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian, And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, edited by Paul Edwards (Simon & Schuster, 1957), 25 and 21-22.

5 George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Word Publishing, 1996), 124.

6 Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Word Publishing, 1997), 2.

7 George Gallup, Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape* (Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 101.

8 George Barna, *Baby Busters: The Disillusioned Generation* (Northfield Publishing, 1994), 122.



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