

RESPONSE TO DAN BOONE'S "ESCHATOLOGICAL TRAVELERS"

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I have a couple of observations related to this concept of being the "church" in a "strange land". The irony is that the "strange land" is the same land we used to be so familiar with. Could it be that we have created an artificial mission environment where Christianity "conquered" the pagan world country by country and planted its flag on new territory believing somehow that anyone living within the boundaries of that territory was on our side and any dissenting voice would be silenced with a few short Biblical quips or shamed into deeper silence and resentment. Then, dissenter by dissenter the ranks grew until a tide of humanity, who do not share "our" views actually have become the majority and we are struggling to accept that reality. So, in shock for the awful changes that have come upon us, we protest, we complain and we alienate ourselves from those who need us most.....people. This is not a response of disagreement with the document, but rather some observations and comment.

The "Christian Nation" myth: (The ultimate superiority complex)

This perception gets in the way of an objective look at who we really are, let alone, where we are. It also clouds any Biblical reality that we are in fact on a journey, simply travelling through. Many North American Christians (And old world Christians) don't accept that we are on a journey, choosing rather to believe that we have arrived with a charge to colonize all the territory God "has given us"! The "Divine Right of Kings" based on I Samuel where Saul anoints David as king over Israel demonstrates the power of such a belief in that when Saul wanted to kill David, David would not defend himself because he was the Lord's anointed. This scripture has been used throughout history by monarchical leaders and has in fact found its way to the organized church which in many contexts has the monarchical leader as its head. (eg. Queen Elizabeth). This "Divine Right of Kings" has morphed into a "Divine Right of Believers" where many have embraced the idea that we have privileged position in this world, and therefore any attack on us is simply unacceptable, any challenge to us must be met with protest and organized opposition, and the appeal to the historically inaccurate fable, that we are a Christian nation is where many take comfort. It is however, false security. It can be strongly argued that there is no such thing as a "Christian Nation", only Christians who live within nations. While, the Old Testament reveals Godly nationhood, the teaching of Jesus reveals the exact opposite. He never talks about "Christian Nationhood", in fact He always refers to His followers as "a people" who are swimming upstream, going against popular culture, outcast and even persecuted.

"Christian Nation" ideology is usually expressed in the supposition that a nation's collective righteousness (if there is such a thing) is determined by legislators and legislation. We actually believe that if we have godly laws we ipso facto have a godly nation. Consequently, the political, religious, marriage often produces the fallacy that in electing conservative politicians to office, we will somehow secure the very freedoms that Jesus tells us we probably won't have as Eschatological travelers. Many conservative Christians in North America view their nations as something of a "theocracy". Consequently, it is a small step to appropriate the language and thinking of "chosen people" (e.g. "Manifest Destiny" ideology. This then has enormous effects throughout the Church of the Nazarene as a whole because the North American world view is still overwhelmingly the most influential in determining collective priorities, practical theology, and organizational structure.

So, accepting the reality that we are not "other worldly" but transients, odd, peculiar etc etc, should help us understand that we are not called to establish a "Christian Caliphate" , but that we are actually salt and light shining into and seasoning the communities into which we have been divinely placed.....and we do this as "Oppressed" & "Marginalized", exiles !

However, even though we are to do this as exiles, we must remember what Jesus said in His High priestly prayer (John 17) where He made it clear that our Kingdom building role is "in the world". While our ultimate end is to enter into the actual presence of Jesus, the term "exile" or even "traveler" might leave us with the impression that I am not actually a member of the place where I now dwell. The fact is...I am! I cannot hide from it's influences, nor must I look for an escape from my primary calling to HAVE influence upon the world in which I live. I am a traveler, yes, I am on a journey yes, but I live HERE and I cannot and must not be tempted to disengage from the world God has called me to. Eschatologically speaking Eternal life, is already in my possession, the authority and the privilege of the Kingdom is already a reality in my life. So, I am not merely a traveler. My "citizenship" may belong elsewhere, but I am a permanent resident of this world until it is no more, or until my mortal life is done.

My theological understanding of "journey" is that I bloom where I am planted, and that I long not to be taken out of the world, but I embrace and claim the prayer of Jesus for me that I be "Kept" while I serve, and I find way to influence a fallen world in the same way I was influenced by another.

The "Parallel Community" Reality: (The antithesis of assimilation)

In this exilic reality, we actually can still sing our songs, but few are joining in. We actually can recite our creeds and belief statements, but few know what we are talking about. We actually can hold up John 3 v 16 on a cardboard poster at a ball game, but not too many people understand what it is. There are immigrants who arrive in Canada from non English or French speaking parts of the world. The amazing thing is that many of them can actually live quite well without ever learning the official languages of Canada. This "parallel" existence serves them well....to a point. The line of demarcation is a line of limitation. They function well within their culture and language, but outside of that relatively small circle, they are not able to function, therefore not able to influence and ultimately not able to make a difference in the society they now find themselves living in. There are scores of "parallel communities" in our country and continent. These communities are not restricted to immigrants; they are evident in religious organizational structure. The fact is that people "in" the church can live quite well speaking the language, knowing the ropes, following the expected code of conduct and doing all of this in parallel with the non-churched community all around. The Eschatological travelers have pitched their tent "inside" the boundaries of moral and spiritual reasoning and feel safe and to a great degree, fulfilled.

The parallel community "problem" is reinforced by a dangerous dichotomy.....We seem to have two theologies in this parallelism: *A THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH and A THEOLOGY FOR THE CHURCH*. The first is good and proper, but the second seems to no allow the first to express itself at a pedestrian level. The theology of the church has many components but the call to communicate the message of Jesus and His love is at its heart.....Sometimes this message

comes to a screeching halt when it is confronted by a Theology FOR the Church. Often, these two expressions are not compatible, and the "Tipping Point" inevitably comes when people who attend our churches seek to "join" our churches, but there are a variety of reasons why they don't qualify.

I really struggle with this, because I am a card carrying member of the Church of the Nazarene, and I believe her message, and am committed to her Creeds and Covenants. BUT, the "Parallel Community" reality (us doing our thing and them doing theirs) is fuelled by this line of demarcation. Yes, the church has standards and practices (some of which have been fashioned by cultural influence and expectation), and we must hold to those things commanded by the Lord, governed by His Love. Evangelical appeal has historically employed the shame-based methodology for conversion. As a result of this the Church has within its ranks, shame -based converts instead of sin forgiven, life liberated Christ followers who look upon the "parallel community" full of people who are just like I was, and if given half a chance, could become part of the Church according to the requirements of Jesus.

For the sake of Jesus and His church, let us fashion a THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH and A THEOLOGY FOR THE CHURCH that does not lead a parallel community down the garden path, only to find the gate closed at the end of it, but actually allows people who are "not of us" to find consistency between what we say we are on this earth to do, and doing it.....and what is "it"?. Finding people were they are , and accepting them for who they are, and having accepted them for who they are in an unregenerate condition, accept them for who they are in a regenerated one.

For many, this "parallel" existence has lost its appeal. Many are losing interest in being part of typical internalized local church communities. To quote the many standing outside our doors...."It's boring in there". The fact is that many of our congregations have become proverbial "Golden Calves" and the devil, in the model of Screwtape, smiles gleefully at the delusion into which we have fallen. We spend time and money fighting desperately to preserve the organizational and social community in which we live, leaving precious little resources and energy for "being" the creative Church within this world. Perhaps it is time to remember our valued theology of repentance, not for the state of our nations, not even for the conduct of her people, but rather repentance by the church.....by Christians who have been trying to escape to heaven before they have actually died. Paul's admonishes us to "die to self," this would include even death to those (wholesome) wishes that are getting in the way of our mission to become part of the everyday workings of the Holy Spirit through the Christian in the marketplace of life.

This will present the church with something of a challenge, but with Holy intent on our part, the challenge will not be insurmountable. In fact, this could actually lead us to the summit of the highest mountain, or to the deepest valley of our exilic regions, and we will experience the sense of assurance, that in our wonderful, challenging, and sometimes intimidating contexts, God is with us.

Hebrews 12 v 1."Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

The prophet lodges his complaint with the Lord in the first 4 verses of Jeremiah chapter 12, he is actually complaining about the "parallel world" and here is what God says in reply (verse 5). "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?"

Concluding Thought:

The race that is marked out for us is not in "parallel" with the world, it is not in another orbit of existence, but rather it is a race marked out with "Samaria" on the itinerary, with "Nineveh" on the itinerary, or with "Babylon" on the itinerary and in each of these we will sing the "Lord's Song".