

RESPONSE TO GORDON SMITH'S
"FORMATION FOR MINISTRY IN A SECULAR AGE"

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I want to thank Dr. Smith for his thoughtful and insightful paper. It is both deeply academic and also very practical. I find myself in agreement with this paper and so this response will be more commentary and suggesting more examples or voices than debate. Dr. Smith divides his paper into 4 sections: "A. The situation in which we find ourselves; B. Sources of Wisdom; C. Ministerial Practices and D. Spiritual Practice for the Church in a Secular Society: The call to 'interiority.'" My comments will follow this outline.

In response to the issues of context, I have always found myself perplexed by the North American church's assumption of majority and privilege. As a missionary kid, I grew up in a minority context, both religiously and ethnically. When I arrived in the US the consumerism which pervaded both the US society and the church communities I found myself a part of, was overwhelming and disturbing. How could people who called themselves Christians have this mentality? Early on I was asking the question, "What do we mean by Christian?" So, I would add to Dr. Smith's statement "The Christian voice is, at most, one voice at the table." (p. 1) that the "Christian voice" is also fractured which makes its voice at the table even less viable.

Dr. Smith suggests 4 responses to "What does Christian witness look like in this time and in this age?" When I came to the US I experienced my Junior High – Seminary years in what could be described as a Christian ghetto—after all it was in Nazarene "Mecca", Kansas City, Missouri! However, I did attend public school, so had some exposure to the "world." But we didn't go to the school parties; instead our church provided alternative entertainment so we wouldn't be exposed to worldly temptations. I attended my first movie, "The Hiding Place," at a movie theatre when NTS arranged for a special showing of the movie, just for NTS students and faculty.

Later I pastored in a context which could be described as the "go along to get along" response. Suddenly, at least it seemed to me, my students were totally absorbed in their secular school activities and especially sports. And, of course, if there was a game on Sunday Morning, they would have to miss church. There was a lot of excitement over "Prom" and what would be worn, where they would go before and after the Prom, etc. No alcohol was allowed at church events or on church property, but there was plenty of alcohol at parties hosted by church members. There was an attempt to shield the "church staff" from these parties and certainly non-alcoholic options were available. But the legalism in the church of my adolescent years seemed to have given way to no boundaries and the emphasis on "love" which was the current theological emphasis—if there was one—gave rise to a religion of sentimentality, with the worst sin being to hurt someone's feelings.

Currently, I find myself in what Dr. Smith has called “culture wars” where Christians seem to think they can legislate morality. Perhaps thinking they can reign in the result of the “go along to get along” response? This war culture does not allow for dialogue with our non-Christian neighbors (or those we perceive to be), so while we long to have influence and a voice, we only make enemies and create barriers between us and them.

I agree that we need to implement a fourth alternative of “‘faithful presence’ – in, but not of the world.” (p. 2) But the structures we have built to be “church” work against this. The walls of the ghetto mentality, including home schooling and Christian schools, as well as the culture wars have made it almost impossible to relate to the world at large. We don’t have the relational tools to do this, nor do we understand the culture. We who have grown up in the “go along to get along” context don’t know what it means to be “not of the world.” We don’t have the analytical skills or awareness to know that Christianity can be peculiar.

This means that we need to radically reinterpret what we mean by “Church”. The recent emphasis on ecclesiology in our theological conferences has been a helpful start, but it has to reach the local church and affect the structures and thinking of our local churches. The formation of our future ministers has to address this radical reinterpretation.

In his second section on “Sources of Wisdom,” I appreciate Dr. Smith’s broadening of the Biblical sources from just the exilic prophets to Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets, but we are Christians and the New Testament has much to say on this subject as well, from the Gospels, to Paul’s letters to the General Epistles. The prophets are not really unique in this message and it seems to me that our conversation is enriched by including Jesus’ teachings on how to live as well as exhortations in the letters. I don’t have time to go into detail, but certainly James reflects the emphasis on social justice, 1 Peter is concerned with living peacefully as a minority in the Empire and in 1 Thessalonians 4 where Paul outlines what sanctification looks like when lived out. It first of all involves personal integrity (vv. 4-8). Secondly, it involves active and true love for fellow believers (vv. 9-10) and thirdly, to be good and respected citizens of society so that our daily life will win the respect of outsiders (vv. 11-12). (Serrão paraphrase)

Dr. Smith does go on to include the “Early Church” and the Church Fathers and perhaps he meant to include the New Testament in the “Early Church” reference, but that was not obvious. But certainly the NT, Early Church and Patristics literatures reflect the Pre-Christendom period from which we can learn much about living as a minority. Two of the points he makes in this section intrigued me. One was his amazement at the current Christian communities that are still insisting on the polarities and division of the 16th and 18th centuries. For Christianity to regain some of its voice as mentioned above, it needs to find a way to unity while respecting diversity. We don’t all need to think alike, but we do need to recognize what we do have in common instead of dwelling on the hairline differences between us.

The second important point was the “full restoration of the catechumenate” (p. 5). Another thing that disturbed me as an MK entering US Christian society was the lack of Biblical knowledge by my peers. Recent polls show that what I observed in the 1960’s is even more pronounced today. (See Gallup and Castelli polls and comments). We live in a society of “biblical illiterates” (Gallup and Castelli) and we expect both our church members and those who have never been in a church to understand the Gospel? Somehow our “Sunday School classes” or small groups need to become more than entertainment and topical studies and they need to include our children and youth. In our “formal education” we make sure that we cover all the important curricular issues and we test for this, but in the church it seems that the religious education of our people is not that important!

The third source of wisdom that Dr. Smith suggests is listening to our brothers and sisters who “live with the challenge or reality of being a minority presence.” (p. 5) This is extremely helpful and while I cannot go into details because of space, we have done this at MVNU in our trips to Turkey, Israel, and Jordan. I would also encourage us not only to listen to, or read writings of these brothers and sisters, but to actually visit their contexts. I wish there was a way to get every one of our ministry students into these minority contexts to listen to the wisdom of those who have been ministering as a minority presence. For those who have had the opportunity, these experiences have been life and ministry changing.

The fourth source is to listen to the voices of those who have already been ministering in secular societies, particularly, the church in Central and Western Europe. We have done this, again in context, in Italy and look forward to doing this in Germany and Switzerland next May. Instead of thinking that we have it all figured out and need to teach our brothers and sisters in these secular and non-Christian nations, we need to listen and learn.

In the third section on Ministerial Practices, Dr. Smith excels in outlining some very important dispositions and skills that our pastors need to minister in a secular age. I don’t have time to comment on all, so will pull out a couple to emphasize. Dr. Smith emphasizes that we can’t “short-change” our students and we need to insist on “a full-orbed theological and pastoral formation.” (p. 8) This is extremely pertinent to those of us in higher education where the pressure has been to reduce hours in our majors and focus primarily on job skills. With students coming in less prepared biblically and theologically than in the past and with the world and ministry in extreme change, they need more, rather than less preparation! And they need experience-oriented education, not just the well-contained and well-regulated world of reading and the classroom. Many of my students have never been out of the confines of their local church, their state and in some cases, their county.

I would encourage us to engage our minority pastors to educate our students on “Advocacy for and skill in fostering just communities” as well as “Peace making.” Many of them have had to develop these skills because of their contexts. I would also like to mention that Dr. John Nielson has recently finished a D. Min. project on creating a liturgy for Lamentation and is a source in our own denomination for creating space for grieving in worship. As an MK who has dealt with different kinds of loss, it was communicated to me that the church (and especially worship) was not the place to talk about these grief issues. That can’t continue.

Finally, a few comments on the last section, “Spiritual Practice for the Church in a Secular Society: the call to “interiority.” As a person who does not identify well with mysticism, I do identify with the idea that the strength of a person comes from within. I would affirm that deep and abiding hope in Christ is the source of that interior strength. The practices of prayer and discernment resulting in what Dr. Smith calls, “a deep awareness of the inner witness of the Spirit” (p. 11) affirm the deep, abiding hope which characterizes true Christianity. The sacraments practice and affirm the unity needed in Christianity if we are to make a difference in a secular society as a minority presence. Studying as well as hearing the scriptures as a community (as well as personally) is vital in our biblically illiterate context. Finally, accountability is imperative if we are to grow as persons in Christ. This accountability is important not just for our interior lives, but also for the life of the world-wide church, if we are to make a difference in our world.

As already indicated previously, I whole-heartedly agree with Dr. Smith on his conclusion that “there is nothing to gain and everything to lose by shorting [and shortening] the process.” (p. 12)