

The Spirituality of the Church

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In discussions about the contemporary mission of the Church it is often said that the Church ought to address itself to the real questions which people are asking. That is to misunderstand the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Church. The world's questions are not the questions which lead to life. What really needs to be said is that where the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer. And that, I suppose, is why the letters of St. Paul contain so many exhortations to faithfulness but no exhortations to be active in mission.¹

Lesslie Newbigin

"Most theologians in the modern West are utopians. God is not."²

Ephraim Radner

In 2012, it was my privilege to lead a group of students on a Reformed Heritage tour. We began in Paris, journeyed to Noyon (Calvin's birthplace and where there is a delightful, small museum honoring him), and then headed to Geneva, and later to Basle, Budapest, Debrecen, and Sarospatok, Hungary. Between Paris and Geneva, however, we spent half a day in a little town up in the mountains south of Lyon. Le Chambon sur Lignon is not much bigger now than it was in 1940 when the French Reformed congregation there began sheltering Jewish children, saving some 3,000 or more from the ovens of the Nazis.³

The congregation's pastor in 2012 was a German, who gave us a brief tour of the "temple" where the church worshipped. Its architecture was almost severely Reformed: no stained glass, no liturgical trappings, only an open Bible on a raised pulpit facing a gathered congregation. There was, however, one piece of architecture that might have been described as ornamental. Over the entrance to the church these words were etched in stone: "*Aimez-vous les uns les autres.*" Love one another.

In some ways those words seem to express the most threadbare of sentiments. Is there any word in the English language more used and abused, more empty of substance than the word *love*? Yet here in this particular context, the words not only seemed unbearably heavy with sacrifice and meaning but also seemed to be the words that only the church could dare to say in the face of such a deep darkness. Love one another.

How does one learn to say that in our day and time? How does one learn to proclaim that, not as a kum ba yah strategy to make warring parties settle down but as the confident witness that only church can render, a witness to the risen Lord's victory over death itself? And finally, how does one proclaim this word as the joyful gift that describes the nature and course of Christian discipleship?

These questions are not easy to answer. No doubt the Holy Spirit must shape and re-shape both our questions and answers, drawing us more deeply into the life of the

living Lord Jesus Christ. Yet even to confess that is to acknowledge there is no easy way or even self-evident strategy for “following after.” For life in the Spirit to be more than a pious sentiment, one must look to the source and character of that Love that the Spirit reveals in him who bids us to love one another.

One place to look is at scripture itself. In his *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, Karl Barth attempts a close reading of scripture in regard to the depiction of Jesus Christ as the “royal man.” Barth is particularly interested in how scripture describes the nature of Jesus’ mission as he engaged with religious, social, and political realities of his day. What does love incarnate look like in such a world? Barth notes that

Jesus was not in any sense a reformer championing new orders against the old ones, contesting the latter in order to replace them by the former.... He did not represent or defend or champion any programme—whether political, economic, moral or religious, whether conservative or progressive. He was equally suspected and disliked by the representatives of all such programmes, although he did not particularly attack any of them.... And he did this simply because He enjoyed and displayed, in relation to all the orders positively or negatively contested around him, a remarkable freedom which again we can only describe as royal.⁴

The love revealed here is seen as both revolutionary and royal, according to Barth, a fearsome love whose Lord “breaks all bonds asunder, in new historical developments and situations, each of which is for those who can see and hear — only a sign, but an unmistakable sign of His freedom and kingdom....”⁵ This royal freedom and revolutionary superiority take a strange shape. For example, the gospels often describe Jesus as almost a passive conservative. As Barth notes, Jesus accepted the temple as self-evidently the house of God. He worshipped on the sabbath at the synagogue, Luke tells us, “as was his custom” (Lk.4:16). He taught not in the streets but in the temple; he “was obedient” to his parents (Lk.2:51) and even insisted that caring for them took precedence over cultic obligations (Mk.7:11ff.). Moreover, the gospels never depict Jesus as directly opposed to the economic conditions of his day and time. He is not faithfully portrayed as either a capitalist or communist. Politically, Jesus also remains elusive. As Barth notes, the Gospels do not contain the “slightest trace either of a radical repudiation of the dominion of Rome or Herod, or for that matter, of any basic anti-imperialism or anti-militarism.”⁶

A passive-conservative, then? Except for some disquieting threads that mar such a pleasant tapestry. Though no reformer, Jesus’ recognition of the “powers that be” seems provisional at best and aloof at other times, as if he were indifferent or even superior to them. His recognition of the temple in Jerusalem has to be seen in the context of his insistence that something greater than the temple is present in himself. And as for faith in the temple, “the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another...” (Lk.21:6). His severe rejection of the family as a divinely ordained order in the kingdom (“Who are my mother and my brothers?” Mk.3:33) indicates something beyond a passive-conservative stance. And it gets worse. Jesus’ disciples do not fast, he violates the sabbath, as do his disciples, and he even claims to be the Lord

of the sabbath (Mk.2:28). His stories and parables depict quite unrealistic economic practices: precious seed sown on rocky soil, a hardened path, among thorns; paying the same wages to workers hired at different times; calling an enterprising businessman a fool because he built bigger barns to house his increased possessions. And all of this, not to mention his counsel to “sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...” (Mk.10:21. Or, “Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth,” and “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink...,do not worry about tomorrow...” (Mt.6:19, 25,34). What kind of conservative is this?

After noting similar political contradictions (his refusal to make a defense before Pilate, his cavalier attitude toward paying taxes, his labeling of Herod as a “fox”), Barth concludes that the characteristic relation between the kingdom of Jesus and the kingdoms of this world is best captured in the disparity to be seen between old and new pieces of cloth, old and new wineskins.

For Jesus, and as seen in the light of Jesus, there can be no doubt that all human orders are this old garment or old bottles, which are in the last resort quite incompatible with the new cloth and the new wine of the kingdom of God. The new cloth can only destroy the old garment, and the old bottles can only burst when the new wine of the kingdom of God is poured into them. All true and serious conservatism, and all true and serious belief in progress, presupposes that there is a certain compatibility between the new and the old, and that they can stand in a certain neutrality the one to the other. But the new thing of Jesus is the invading kingdom of God revealed in its alienating antithesis to the world and all its orders.⁷

Such an “alienating antithesis,” which is at the heart of Jesus’ gospel, not only expresses the remarkable freedom with which Jesus confronts the powers of his day (and ours!) but also represents the shaking of the foundations of every political, economic, and social order. The gospel has ever and always been an unreliable ally. Indeed, the love proclaimed here threatens not just the totalitarian or patently unjust regimes of every age but also calls into question the basis of all the legal justifications of rights and duties so carefully cultivated and prized by more consensual orderings of society.

So, does this “alienating antithesis” dissolve into such a radical transcendence that all we can do is hail it from afar, confining ourselves to a “spirituality” that never touches the conflicts, miseries, or even joys of this world? That is one kind of “spirituality of the church” that has sometimes been affirmed. And it is true that the freedom with which Jesus engages those who are settled in their status, whether it be religious or political or social, should not be overlooked. He is almost scary that way, and the gospels make it clear that the wisest of his opponents (e.g., Herod, the Pharisees, Pilate, not to mention the demons, and sometimes even the disciples themselves) perceived that freedom quite clearly and found it unnerving, always trying either to soften or domesticate it or in the end extinguish it altogether. Yet what expresses his freedom most concretely and keeps the “alienating antithesis” of his gospel from being reduced to some impenetrable transcendence is Jesus’ strange and unembarrassed embrace of his own poverty, and his welcoming of the poor and miserable and least of these as his own, indeed, as reliable signs of his kingdom. The

freedom of his love is scary not just because it is “alienating” to the orders we might think well-established, but even more because it is so joyful in its embrace of those hungry for good news (Lk.4:18). The “fear nots” that accompany his birth and so often announce his message reveal the deeply joyful character of his kingdom, a kingdom not just of God but of the God who will not be God without God’s children. Such a joyful covenant is at the heart of this “alienating” freedom, and it is a joy that cannot be taken away from those to whom it is given (Jn.16:22).

Accordingly, the joy of Christ’s embrace of this world is an earthly joy, whose Spirit, far from seeking some ethereal realm beyond the flesh, finds its pulse beating amidst the miseries and hurts and hopes of our quite fleshly lives. Such joy is the fruit of that Spirit that witnesses in its own way to the freedom of Jesus’ presence among us, inspiring the strange and even unnerving confidence that he is Lord and that taking no thought for the morrow might prove the most faithful form of discipleship.

To return to Le Chambon and the witness rendered there during World War II, what is striking is not the remarkable shelter the congregation provided to those in great need or even the courageous love exhibited in those dark days, but rather the freedom and confidence that enabled that congregation to be the church of Jesus Christ. The “spirituality” of this church knew something of the incarnate Christ and the way in which his scary freedom compelled those who followed to embrace the quite fleshly needs of this world. In his company, the church discovered what it meant to be, and to receive, a neighbor. Just so, the confidence manifest in the witness of this congregation made it dangerous to the orders of its day, not through any overt threats but merely (!) through the rehearsal of the story that sustained its life. That story is as dangerous as it is joyful. It makes space for the other where there is none. Indeed, in the worship called forth by this story, that little congregation in the mountains of southern France found the spiritual gifts and conceptual tools to imagine acts of love as incommensurable as they were evangelical. Here, in their worship and life, the unsettling freedom of Jesus sounded an echo in the liberating welcome of the stranger and refugee. Just so, the “fear nots” that once accompanied the birth of a little Jewish boy born in a stable 2000 years ago were heard again by Jewish children facing the darkness of a 20th century evil. Whatever else the gospel of Jesus Christ means for the church, it means at least this much: that it is given the Spirit of freedom to be the church.

The question before the church today is not programmatic. The question is not how to dismantle, re-educate, or otherwise eliminate various evils. To think such were a human possibility would be to engage in a “spirituality of the church” that ignores the depths of human sinfulness and reduces our plight to one of attitudinal change and appropriate language. Were that our dilemma, we would hardly need Jesus Christ or the liberating grace of his Spirit-filled humanity to discover a life together that is not so much a platform for our agendas as it is a formative presence that shapes us into a new people. Despite the divisions in our culture that we take so seriously and whose agendas are all too ready to define us, our foundations remain quite unshaken. Our rhetoric only confirms our satisfaction with our self-chosen tribes. But what if these divisions don’t really define us? What if our identity is to be found elsewhere?

What we lack today is that freedom that is confident in the victory of Jesus Christ

over sin and death, a freedom that neither howls with the wolves of popular culture nor is captive to its various political agendas. Such a freedom *creates* a culture of forgiveness, *practices* disciplines of love, *ventures* concrete actions of hope. Such a freedom will dare to be the church, risking silence when others demand that we speak, and speaking when others would have us be silent. Such a freedom will not allow the guilt and shame for the church's own daily (and historical) failures to drive it either to despair or into some utopian "spirituality" untethered to the miseries and the joys of this fleshly life. Though we may well not see everything in subjection to our efforts and in fact see only how often we have failed to live out the gospel, still, as the author of Hebrews insists, "we do see Jesus" (Heb.2:9). He is the one who defines us. Indeed, that is what the Holy Spirit helps us see, opening our eyes to see him who claims us for his own, liberating us from our own loneliness, anger, and despair, enabling us to see beyond ourselves to our neighbor. This is how we are formed in Christ and by Christ, not by insulating us from the world but strengthening us to be the kind of community whose witness is capable of loving that world in all its brokenness and otherness.

It is Jesus who makes for redemptive community, and it is as the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see him that we learn again, and yet again, how to become his community. The mistake is to think that we can do this in some easier way, perhaps by looking to ourselves or burnishing our credentials that will justify our piety, politics, or program. No, one must pray for such a gift of the Spirit, even long for it and risk becoming that community that finds its meaning, hope, and joy not in popular slogans or pious phrases but in the life Jesus Christ forms and shapes among us. Such a risk will entail more than prayer and longing, however. Just as the freedom of Jesus' love was exercised out of his poverty and his ministry was largely among and for the poor of his day, just as he expressed again and again the lethal threat that wealth poses to our souls, just as so much of our anger and divisiveness are driven not by a depressed economy or impoverished church, so in order to risk today the moral and spiritual formation that makes for saints, we will have to become poor again and discover the ligaments and ties that truly bind us to this One who will not be without us or our neighbor. I am not sure what all this might mean, and indeed, I frankly find the prospect unsettling and scary. But I suspect that there is something deep within the heart of Jesus' gospel that is inimical to comfortable affluence, and that to practice a Christianity unacquainted with real need is to engage in a pose, a religious pose, even a quite "spiritual" pose, but one that is entirely empty. And worse, such a pose tempts one to find meaning not in the life together that is ours in Jesus Christ but in other realms that are in the end less forgiving: politics, social media, and the lonely accumulation of wealth.

Is it too much to say that the narrow way of the church offers an alternative to the many broad roads the culture provides to realize ourselves? Is it too much to say that the tribal identities on offer today end only in misery? Is it too much to say that it is a joy to be the church today? Those who preach and teach regularly in congregations riven by pandemic, racial unrest, and cultural and political divides might commit to such a proposition only with tongues pressed firmly in cheek. It is so much easier to be wisely cynical or prophetically angry, allowing the culture and its divisions to form and shape our identity. It is so much easier to celebrate our individual righteousness while deprecating the wickedness of institutions and their many deceptions. How strange

that the proclamation of Jesus resulted in, of all things, the church.⁸ Surely Jesus could have done better than that.

Yet this Savior never seemed to do much except in the company of others. Even in death he is depicted as being surrounded by sinners. That, evidently, is where he chooses to do his work, and not only chooses to do so, but to do so by joyfully embracing the gift of life together. “Fear not, little flock,” he tells his disciples, “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk.12:32). One can hear in such words exactly the kind of freedom that sustains what might well seem paradoxical: a humbly confident church.

In his little book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that those “who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.”⁹ It is enough to be the church. It is not enough to be only the church or to be the church preoccupied with itself. Neither is it enough to pretend to be dragging the church toward “the right side of history.” Bonhoeffer knew how radical a thing the church’s own life is and how disruptive its presence can be in a world bent on its various schemes of salvation. The lives that are shaped by the life Jesus Christ forms in his life together are lives that dare to love one another and dare even more to be held accountable for their many failures to live up to that calling. Just so they risk the embarrassment and shame that a twitter culture is so eager to heap upon them. How much less embarrassing it would be to never risk loving like that, never risk being exposed by a story that daily threatens to reveal our sinful failures. But just there do we find that mercy that is so “alienating” to a more virtuous and efficiently driven culture. And it is that mercy, as Bonhoeffer knew, that gives life.

The title of this rambling little essay is taken from the great though un-prosecuted heresy of the Southern Presbyterian Church: “the Spirituality of the Church.” That heresy sought to insulate the church and shield it from the embarrassing claims posed by racial, economic, political, and social conditions, so many of which contradicted the life together that Jesus Christ has made in his own body. It was thought that the gospel could only be proclaimed by confining it to “spiritual” matters, thus avoiding the embarrassment of having to be held accountable to a more incarnate word. One can only be grateful that this particular heresy, though not dead, has ceased to plague the church with the same intensity as in previous times.

But, heresies are useful things in part because they are so instructive. And embedded in nearly every heresy is an evangelical truth that has been distorted. In this heresy that truth is the fact that the gospel is not captive to any political, social, economic, or racial ideology, and that the church possesses a freedom that only it can exercise. It is that freedom, the freedom to listen and hear and tell of One who loves sinners and calls them into his life and makes of them, dare one say it, a new creation. Out of his love, such new creatures dare to love one another, even when loving one another is hard, not obviously profitable, and altogether uncomfortable. Yet that is the church’s particular gift, and it is that freedom that constitutes the radical nature of the church’s own life. Such a “spirituality of the church,” rightly understood, is what makes events like those that occurred at Le Chambon possible. And when the church faithfully and

confidently risks being the church, then its witness will voice that “Fear not” which is at the heart of its own life and the message it bears to the world.

Notes

1 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 119.

2 Ephraim Radner, *A Profound Ignorance, Modern Pneumatology and Its Anti-modern Redemption* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), 9.

3 There have been a number of books and at least one documentary describing this remarkable undertaking. The documentary is entitled “*Weapons of the Spirit*” by Pierre Sauvage, a beneficiary of that congregation’s efforts. A good place to start reading about this church and its pastor and his wife is Philip Hallie’s book *Let Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

4 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 171-172.

5 *Ibid.* 173.

6. *Ibid.* 175.

7 *Ibid.* 177.

8 The famous quote is from the Roman Catholic modernist and biblical scholar Alfred Loisy: “Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom and what arrived was the church.”

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 36.