

We just returned from two prison visits in Livingston, to J and J. One is on death row; one is over halfway through a 12 year sentence. Both were excellent visits; I count these men as friends.

We’ve seen a number of “jailhouse” conversions over the years; most turn out to be short term, and when released most sooner or later go back to their former lives. A very few do in fact change. The latest that didn’t make it was A; after a couple of years out and what appeared to be a promising turn-around, she relapsed. We’ve wondered why she didn’t, trying to understand how best to work with her and others so that basic changes will be effective.

Perhaps the major difficulty with which we have struggled is that it feels like we are simply trying to conform others to a typical middle-class American culture. From working with her and others, that is not possible; the typical values of suburban America simply mean little or nothing to these people, and they have no desire or will to conform to it. Rather, for them it only sets up impossible pressures with which at least some simply cannot cope. The typical middle class response to these people is generally to quit being lazy and get on with it, but that response simply does not work; it only sets up tensions that divide. How then should we respond?

A knows how to survive on the streets. When she is sober and out of the street life, she can genuinely not want to go back to it. She said the last time she was arrested that she thought it was her last chance; after 30 years in that life, if she slipped and fell back to it she did not think she would ever give it up again. She went back to it some months ago, was picked up, and is back in TDC. K also knows how to survive on the streets. We’ve kept him on a number of crisis occasions, and helped him occasionally when we could see that he materially needed it, but nothing seems to change. I doubt that he will ever be other than in and out of homelessness.

Tonight it occurred to me that I have seen similar problems in well to do middle class families. One is R, raised as a spoiled brat and continues to live that way. Married to a stockbroker, she lived a very comfortable country club life until Black Monday, October 19, 1987, and that life dried up. While they lived far from penury, they had to make severe cutbacks. During that time she began to understand and empathize much more with the poor and those that had trouble making their way in life. Yet, when the money began to come back in, she didn’t retain what she learned and reverted to her former thoughtless indolence. Yet, the last I knew she goes to church and thinks herself a Christian, though she is aware of the problems in her life.

Another is B, who lived for several years in real financial hardship to start a faith based counseling ministry. She knew difficult financial times, and she could relate well with some that came looking for help. Last spring she married again, and she is now quite wealthy. B can now indulge a life that few will ever know. She still works with the counseling ministry and wants to increase and multiply that. In a recent fund raising letter, she recounted how God had led her to the sacrifice of giving up her salary to turn it back into the ministry. Yet I know how she lives; there simply is no significant sacrifice in her giving up her salary. Where once we contributed to the ministry, we have chosen to redirect those funds to others that we find more urgently need the financial support.

That the lives of these four look so different culturally makes it very easy to miss an essential common characteristic. For all the many differences between them, R, B, K and A in one crucial

sense are not different from each other: they primarily live for themselves. The hard times that they have been through have given them an important perspective in their relation to and need of others; yet when the pressure was off, they did not keep those hard-won lessons. Measured by how they spend their money, all four live an essentially self-focused life. In that sense they have all lived a “jailhouse” religion.

The demand, the claim, of the Gospel is that one live for others as well as for oneself. To focus on what one has or does not have is to rather miss the point. The point is how one responds to the clear needs of others with the little or great that one does have. This is simply the import of Matthew 25: do we respond in empathy and compassion for those that were in need? If we do not, we’ve not understood the heart of God, as that is what he is like. I John 3 is quite clear: if one sees one’s brother in need and does not respond, how can the love of God be in him?

So what does it mean to see others in need? Two thousand years ago such choices were generally much more localized, though there could be large scale aid efforts on the behalf of others, such as the church in Jerusalem in famine. Today however, one must close one’s eyes to miss the famine and poverty, suffering, disease and oppression.

And yet middle class suburban Christian America lives in relative self focused comfort. Last summer I was at a large church in an affluent northern suburb for a conference during the week, pastored by a very well known Christian personage; it is no accident that it is within a very short distance of the largest non-mall shopping complex I have ever seen. Walking through the deserted building on a weekday, I had occasion to note details that might have been lost on a crowded Sunday. The nursery was the one that most remains with me. There was a large plate glass window that opened up onto the main hall, and prominently placed in front of the window were two rather gaudy bassinets. The purpose seemed clear; in passing down the hall, adults could stop and ohhh and awww the little angels. What slick marketing... make them feel good and they will come back. No doubt there are committed people there; there must be in every church or it will fall apart. No doubt those in that area have a great need to come to know Jesus. But where is the presentation of the Gospel that calls one into an active participation in the larger community in which there are real, dire needs, that calls one to restructure one’s life around that larger community and not toward one’s own sense of well being? Perhaps it is there and I missed it; I can only hope so.

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