

A couple of months ago in a discussion with a few friends I came to understand something I had never seen before. I am still absorbing the implications of this for the life of the church.

Four hundred years of prophetic silence was broken by John the Baptist with a succinct statement of radical equality. Tom Friedman sees the world flattening now; John saw that two millennia ago. John spoke of a leveling, a flattening: every hill cut down, every valley filled in. It doesn't seem too far a stretch to consider that the valleys would be filled with what was cut off the hills. When asked what that means, Luke 3:10-14 records that John gave two specifics: one, be satisfied with what you have, though you have the power to coerce from others, and two, if you have two, give one, whether it be clothing or food.

As I have considered this, the usual style of John's declaration as poetic verse seems a travesty of translation. John did not live in the desert composing refined verse; his message was a blunt ram against well defended gates protecting entrenched powers, and it must be heard that way. It must be understood metaphorically, as John was not addressing the alteration of topographical features. Yet, because it must be understood metaphorically, we perhaps too readily lose the forceful power of John's words regarding our contemporary personal and ecclesiastical lives.

Jesus expanded this in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:38-42. In a context of coercion, where one was compelled, Jesus said to give two. We might term this radical generosity. Though it is a different situation than John was addressing, there is still the notable 1:2 ratio of giving and response.

Paul, in II Corinthians 8:1-15, concludes that the principle that was to govern inter-church relationships is equality. Large, wealthy churches who gather much would not have too much, and small churches that gather little will not have too little. When is the last time you heard that preached from a pulpit?

Radical equality, indeed.

Did John, Jesus and Paul not intend that their words be taken at face value, that the church is to live in a radical equality, a radical generosity? One might think that it would take an artful exegesis to avoid the force of these texts in the life of the church; on the contrary, most of the church lives in ignorance of these texts and their import. I certainly have no privilege in this; I have missed it all of my life until recently.

And none of this is to be enforced by any rule, tithe, regulation, or redistribution structure the goal of which is to level the economic status of individual Christians. Paul is very clear in II Corinthians 8 that participation is voluntary, not coerced. Any notion that the church should end up with anything like a typical leftist social structure of wealth redistribution is to patently misunderstand all three (cf. Paul's analogy of gathering different amounts of manna, as mentioned above.) Neither is it a typical conservative structure with the goal of individual wealth accumulation in which the public good is accomplished as a by-product. Yes, individuals must accumulate wealth in order to have sufficient to give, but the purpose is not the benefit of the individual; rather, it is the good of the entire community.

This may be something which has never been seen before on a wide scale, and where practiced

locally may not long survive in integrity. It is an organization that works best in weakness, dependent on the individual discernment and voluntary compliance of all of its members. Yet, there clearly must be a superstructure that can oversee and balance intra-church relationships. That was Paul's role in the various churches he oversaw.

Many questions arise in considering how to implement this. The most profound is that the focus of the church must change. Individuals within a single church must think of each other as equals. Individuals and leaders within a church must consider other churches, large or small, regardless of geographic boundaries, as peer. Trustworthy and broken inter-church leadership must be in place to balance the needs and correct abuses. I hesitatingly conclude that what is needed is true apostolic leadership; my hesitation is that many today want to claim such, and I mistrust the selfish motivations of at least some, if not many.

Without doubt this sounds like the stuff of a hopelessly idealistic fantasy that is destined for swift, decisive failure. I know that. What I cannot escape is that this is the state of the church which John, Jesus and Paul desired to realize.

The leadership of the church is the pivot on which this can or cannot be implemented. The primary focus almost certainly must be the care of one's own church and its gain, in numbers of members and/or income; that is not wrong per se. Where most fall short is that they do not consider others as equals, rather, competing within a given market for members, whether that market is geographical or, increasingly, on the Internet.

Our eschatology also has a direct influence on our charity. If we think we are all "going to heaven," that is, that we will be transformed to a totally different spiritual existence, in a totally different place or state of being, in which God will set all things right *there and then*, there is little impetus to drive for justice and equity now. If however we understand that God is about renewing *this* earth, that *this* earth is the locus of redemption, of salvation, that the kingdom of God is about reclaiming domination over *this* earth, and that the church is to begin to live and act *now* toward the eventual culmination of that kingdom *here*, our understanding about how we should act radically shifts.

In my view the Incarnation and our promised resurrection forcefully bear testimony to the latter eschatology. Jesus took a human nature, which he did not have previously, in order that we might participate in his life, his nature, which we could not previously. When Jesus became human, humanity became part of the Godhead, which nature he will never lose. He became human to redeem, to reclaim, to renew, to save, this earth. When Jesus was resurrected, he was resurrected on this earth, though his nature was changed. Our destiny in resurrection is to be as he is, on this earth.

Finally, the scope of our thinking and our action must be global; we know too much to restrict regionally. As I have written elsewhere in this blog, the implication of the parable of the good Samaritan is that there is no one on this earth that we cannot call a neighbor, to whom consequently we owe a debt of love.

This is but a summary sketch of my thoughts to date. Much more can and should be said on these and numerous other points. To be continued as I develop this further, in the meantime

constructive comments are welcome.

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