

PERSONS FIRST

(second in a series on "The New Liberal Church")

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"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27

"For freedom Christ has set us free, stand fast therefore, and do not submit to the yoke of slavery." Galatians 5:1

The wild, mad events in Washington this past week, the occupation of three buildings, the killing and wounding of several people and the holding of more than a hundred hostages - such events would shake us to the core were we not getting used to them. In our time fanatical terrorism is commonplace. Commonplace too is that repression which both finds its pretext in terrorism and which begets more terrorism. President Carter's insertion of human rights issues into international relations may not turn out to be the most polished, or even the shrewdest diplomacy. As we might have expected the charges have been thrown back at us, and however exaggerated they may be, they are not entirely false. Still, it is good to get such issues out into the open. For the brutal denial of human worth and dignity is evident on every continent today, and even countries with long traditions of freedom find that freedom imperiled by their own secret police and espionage agencies

In all of this we find people trying to preserve or reform society at the expense of that which is most valuable in any society. Always people lose sight of persons. That happens in fanatical movements. In such movements people lose their own personhood. They let themselves get swallowed up in what Frank Shea once referred to when he was here in Duluth as "the collective swoon." However worthy the cause may be, people sink to the level of cattle on stampede. When that happens they not only lose their own personhood, but they run over that of others. They become ruthless, which is to say, they act without ruth, without compassion. Repressive governments likewise lose sight of persons. In trying to maintain what they claim to be law and order - whose law and whose order is always an open question - they justify any use or abuse of people. Either way the sacredness of personhood gets lost.

In a larger sense all the troubles of contemporary society are somehow attributable to this loss. So often we lose sight of persons in those very enterprises by which we claim to care for persons. People feel lost today not only in factories and governments, but in schools and hospitals. We lose sight of persons in the pursuit of grand ideas and lofty ideals and in the service of something called Humanity with a capital "H". Saul Bellow's "Dangling Man" said that he left the Communist Party when he decided that with all its talk about the human race the party was doing less for that race than one nurse with a bedpan. Religious devotion may lose sight of persons too. In the last analysis this was the issue between Jesus and his critics. Whether it was healing on the Sabbath, the case of a woman caught in adultery, or accepting invitations from tax-collectors, the issue was always what comes first, the person or the doctrine, the person or the rule. Jesus lived out with passion and compassion that basic principle of ethics that Immanuel Kant defined in his dry, abstract way:

"So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only."

All human evil comes down to a denial of that principle. That is to say, it comes down to a denial of the intrinsic and surpassing worth of personhood. The persistent temptation is to try to make persons, whether ourselves or others, into things. "As a thing," said Abraham Heschel, "man is explicable, as a person he is both mystery and surprise." There is something in us, in you and me, that wants to eradicate that mystery and surprise. We want people to be manageable. We want them to be means, not ends, to be things, not persons. And when we organize society about that want, we are in trouble.

On the other hand, all human goodness centers in reverence for persons. Such reverence is rooted in the biblical understanding of humanity. God made the human person in his own image declares the book of Genesis. The word became a person and dwelt among us full of grace and truth, says John. Nothing on earth matters more than a person because a person is the prism of divinity. Only by hallowing persons can we serve the Lord. And if there is a mission given to us to the church today, given to us in these times when personhood gets obliterated in vast impersonal systems, in blind terrorism, in sadistic repression, I say, if there is a mission given to the church for these times, it is to proclaim the sacredness of the human person and to create communities where that sacredness is nurtured and respected. Our mission is to say and to show that persons matter more than systems, more than doctrines, more than institutions, more than governments, more than abstract principles. Our mission is to create within the church and to propose to the world a climate where next to God, persons come first.

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Now if we believe in the sacredness of persons we shall also believe in freedom for persons. Persons require freedom in order to grow into the fullness of their personhood. A spiritual community that reverences persons will be a community that fosters such freedom. It will foster that intellectual freedom which encourages people to arrive at their own conclusions and to make their own decisions. It will afford that emotional freedom in which people may express their own feelings while at the same time they are protected from undue emotional pressure. It will cultivate that social freedom in which each person is cherished in his or her individuality and not squeezed into some mold of rigid conformity.

In my manifesto I alluded to certain threats to such personal freedom that sometimes arise in religious communities. I said that the new liberal church will reject all authoritarian and fanatical ways of thinking and behaving. I carried that rejection beyond mere dogmatism to what I called "styles of governance and techniques of group dynamics." I said:

"The new liberal church rejects all methods of working with people which subject them to emotional duress."

Let me cite a personal experience that illustrates in part what I have in mind here. Ten years ago when I was living in Sacramento, a young man who sometimes attended my church told me that he had been participating in a small group where the glossolalia, or speaking with tongues, was practiced. He also gave me a book telling how some well-educated leaders of mainline denominations were finding renewed faith through the gift of tongues. The young man invited me to attend a meeting of his group.

I went, partly because he had invited me, partly out of curiosity, partly because I myself was ready to reach out for something that would put some

spark into my own spiritual life and into the church generally. The map he gave me led to a home in a rather remote suburban area. The hostess was a woman in her late thirties who remained pretty much on the sidelines. The remainder, about a dozen in all, were much younger. Most were students at a local junior college. I would say that the age of 19-20 was typical. The meeting began with some folk hymns led by the best ukelele player I ever heard. There was a rather rambling sermon about the blood of Christ by a man slightly older than the others. Then rather suddenly everyone began to speak in tongues, everyone with the exception of myself and one young girl who also was a visitor. Almost on signal the tongues ceased. One young man declared that he had just made up his mind to enter the ministry, and the leader resumed his rather bloody reflections on the blood of Christ. It now began to dawn on me that over the course of the evening this whole event was gradually closing in on that young girl who was the other visitor. She had been brought there with the express purpose of getting her soul saved and that's what they were about. The preacher began to zero in on her as did others. Finally the girl began to cry. Everyone put their arms around her and told her how great it was that she was saved.

Shortly after that I left. Regarding the tongues phenomenon I kept an open mind though I incline to the belief that it is a subpersonal form of behavior. But the more I thought about it the more I was bothered about that girl. I felt that I had witnessed a kind of assault on the human spirit. It disgusted me.

When I wrote about the things the new liberal church rejects, I nowhere mentioned by name people who call themselves "Evangelicals." I had no intention of reading people who go by that label out of my kind of church or of accusing them all of the things I said must be rejected. However, I do believe that the whole revival meeting tradition in this country shows a tendency to the sort of emotional duress which I believe is a violation of personhood. I believe that people sink to subpersonal levels, that they self-destruct their personal freedom, when they let themselves be swamped by emotional orgies. And I think that people violate the personal freedom of others when they seek to manipulate crowds and to engineer conversions in the way that sometimes happens under religious auspices. There is a need for more pep-rally spirit in the churches of the liberal heritage. There is a need for a more passionate expression of conviction. But I think our reverence for persons ought to make us especially vigilant about maintaining an atmosphere of freedom in the church, not only intellectual freedom but emotional freedom as well.

In my manifesto I also said this:

"The new liberal church rejects the spiritual imperialism which approaches people not as persons to be respected, but as territory to be captured."

I observed an amusing, yet also rather sinister, activity at the Minneapolis airport not long ago. A young woman in a long, rather spectacular dress took her position facing the stream of people coming off the planes. Suddenly she would dart up to an unsuspecting man and pin a flower on his lapel. In most cases the man would smile coyly and before he knew it he would find himself presented with a religious magazine which he might acquire for the price of a dollar. The technique was amazingly successful. Hardly one man in twenty can escape a pretty girl in a situation like that. I escaped, but then I am that one man in twenty.

Well, that was one way of capturing territory. I cannot help feeling that most missionary and evangelistic activity is motivated in part by some basic territorial drive. That feeling led to my expression "spiritual imperialism." What is it that has made Christians in the past feel constrained to spread their beliefs and institutions even by means of military conquest and bribery? What sends these people knocking on our doors usually at the most inconvenient hours of the day and night, insisting that they impart the word to us? Is it possible that much of this activity arises from people's own insecurity about themselves and their faith? Can it be that they are so uncertain about the territory that is their own souls that they must constantly try to conquer new ground in order to reassure themselves? Sometimes when people go after our souls we get the feeling that they are not really interested in us at all. That is to say, the person does not matter. What matters is the soul which is lifted off much as the Apache war parties lifted scalps or the ancient Israelites, foreskins. And sometimes the report of an evangelistic crusade sounds rather like those old news releases from Vietnam. What is emphasized is the body count.

I said in my manifesto I believe that the new liberal church should share such grace as it has received. I have always felt that denominations like ours are not aggressive enough in using the public media to express their point of view. I do not go so far as to suggest there may not be a legitimate role for missionary and evangelistic activity. The world is the scene of competing ideas, values and beliefs and heaven knows, some of them are pretty horrible. If we are concerned about persons, we must be concerned that the best ideas, values and beliefs get a hearing. But I think that when it comes to the effort to take other people into our thing (of course, I know that we think it is God's thing too) we must always take a hard look at our motives and ask ourselves what comes first here, a person set free for the truth, or our ideas, our institution, our exercise in spiritual imperialism?

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In my manifesto I also had something more positive to say about persons and freedom. I said:

The new liberal church will affirm reverence for each person's spiritual insight. Of course, I was aware that there is a false liberalism much ingrained in us that cultivates indifference to religious belief. Therefore, I went on immediately to say that the kind of church I had in mind "will not inflict on people the insult of saying that it can care for them while showing indifference concerning their beliefs." You can say this for certain less liberal groups: they do spend their time together promoting their cause and sharing their convictions. They don't degrade the church into a place where people have nothing better to do than to polish the silver and show the latest film sent over by the telephone company. One cannot reverence persons unless one tries to meet them on the deepest level. That is what the church is for.

Therefore, I went on to say:

"Reverence for persons will link to a higher reverence in such a way as to yield the hope that when people meet freely and in mutual respect to share their deepest concerns, something greater than the people themselves will appear."

An Evangelical Presbyterian from Minneapolis wrote a letter to The Christian Century, a copy of which he sent to me. In that letter he swooped in on the passage I just read. He said, "This sounds like humanism. This Calvinist has trouble with that concept."

I realized that this portion of my article was somewhat out on a limb. But I replied to my critic in this way: first I cited chapter and verse from Calvin's Institutes to show that even Calvin allowed that Adam kept a little of the divine image after the fall. You have to do that sort of thing with Presbyterians. Then I wrote:

"What is implied is the presence of God in human relationships, and the conviction that when those relationships are ones of mutual respect and compassion and focused upon a common quest for God, people are drawn into a relationship transcending that which is merely human. If people met God in Jesus it was in precisely such terms."

Well, we have covered a lot of ground. But out of that ground there are three basic things I want to affirm today, three things that I believe are rooted in the biblical-Christian tradition, that were given special emphasis in the old liberal heritage, and which we do well to reaffirm now:

First, there is the belief that persons are more precious than any other item in creation and that the church should dedicate itself to persons being treated as ends and not means.

Second, that reverence for persons calls for respect for the freedom of persons and that the church should be a community that fosters freedom and avoids oppression.

Third, that when people meet freely on the basis of their deepest concerns and out of reverence for one another, they will also meet God.

Reverence for persons, freedom for persons, the divine possibilities of personal dialogue - those are three things to believe in that come through our liberal heritage. If we took them seriously we would not complain so much that we have nothing left for which to stand.