



Isenheim Altarpiece

The Isenheim Altarpiece is an altarpiece painted by the German artist Matthias Grünewald in 1506-1515. It is on display at the Unterlinden Museum at Colmar, Alsace, in France.

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-Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Letters and Papers from Prison



Hope for the Future of the Church

Michael Jinkins

President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary



Recently a young woman and I had a conversation after she had attended worship in a Presbyterian Church. She is, by the way, a cradle Presbyterian, who loves the Presbyterian Church. But that day, after worship, she told me, “We really need to hear a hopeful message from our church. We hear over and over the most depressing news. But the church should be a place where we hear the message of hope, real hope.”

Her comments set me to thinking about hope and cynicism.

Cynicism is easy. It takes no special talent to lob grenades of criticism or cynically to dismiss the best effort of others or to sneer at what someone is trying to accomplish. Cynicism is easy. The world is, after all, fallen. And human beings are flawed creatures. Sin is anything but original, original sin included. Cynicism is easy.

Hope is hard. And hope is a theological act. It isn’t the same as optimism. Hope is hard because hope swims against the stream. Hope is hard because hope requires discipline, spiritual discipline and prayer and even meditation to sustain. And hope is the hard work to which we are called as disciples of Jesus Christ. I want to say a few words in favor of hope.

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Last year, the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee asked me to make a presentation for them in response to the question, “Why Church? Why the Presbyterian Church?” I tried over and over again to write a response to those two questions. And then I did something I’ve never done before. I decided that although these were the questions they had asked, they were the wrong questions. And at considerable risk of appearing ungrateful in light of their very kind invitation to address them, I wrote a presentation that set about asking very different questions.

Their questions were absolutely sincere. I think their questions not only reveal our love for the church but also betray our confusion, our anxiety, and, ironically and unintentionally, they disclose why our church has grown increasingly irrelevant as we have chased the rabbit of relevance from one patch to another. I believe the source of much of our cynicism in the church, and one reason we find it so hard to articulate our hope, is because we’ve gotten the questions wrong.

So, what are the right questions?

Not long after coming to Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary as president, I engaged in a year-long project of visiting one-on-one with all of our staff, faculty and board of trustees and many of our seminary’s friends and supporters.

This “Listening Tour Project” took me not only across campus, but from one end of our country to the other as well. I wanted to learn from every person what they believed we need in order to better to accomplish our school’s mission.

During one of these conversations with the faculty, Dr. Marty Soards, professor of New Testament studies, gave me a book — Ernest Käsemann’s *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). He underlined a particular passage in that book that he wanted me to read and remember: “Wherever ecclesiology [the study of the church] moves into the foreground, however justifiable the reasons may be, Christology [the study of Jesus Christ] will lose its decisive importance, even if it does so by becoming integrated, in some form or other, in the doctrine of the church, instead of remaining the church’s indispensable touchstone.” (120-121)

Professor Soards knew, of course, that I am a theologian and that I have devoted a large proportion of my scholarship and writing to the subject of ecclesiology, the study of the church. He knew I had written a couple of books on that subject, and he was reminding me that our focus on the church can distract us from that which is the church’s central task - the announcement of the reign of God in Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in a time of great anxiety and danger in his own nation in the 1930s as Nazism was on the rise in Germany, told his students that the first task of the church is to be silent in the presence of the Word of God. Bonhoeffer said we should wait and listen for God’s Word until we are called upon to ask and respond to the right questions. [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper Row, 1960), 27]

Bonhoeffer does not doubt that there is such a thing as the right question. The right questions, he says, are “asked by horrified, dethroned human reason.” They are the questions of faith, the questions drawn from the lips of humanity in the presence of God. The first of these questions is the question we address to Jesus Christ himself: “*Who are you?*” (30-33)

In a time when voices across Bonhoeffer’s homeland and around the world were asking a variety of questions, some very compelling questions, questions about whom we should worship and obey, as well as questions about the church’s security, its privileges and powers, its status, its popularity, and its future, Bonhoeffer did what Professor Soards asked me to do. Bonhoeffer focused his full attention on the Who Question: “*Who are you, Christ?*”

Bonhoeffer says that there is a corresponding question which Christ asks of each of us. Christ addresses each of us personally, individually, and asks us to respond *in the first person singular* to a question Jesus asked his followers long ago: “*Who do YOU say that I am?*”

Do you see where I am going?

The great questions facing our church today are not, “*What can the Presbyterian Church do to ensure that it has a future?*” Or, even, “*How can we guarantee the survival of our denomination?*” If we care about our church, if we love our church, we must ask the right questions, and questions about institutional survival put us on the downward track of spiraling anxiety and cynicism.

The question that is the right question for us remains, “*Who is Jesus Christ?* Inevitably when we ask this question another question will follow: “*Who does Christ want us to be?*”

THE MOTIVATIONS

There are many reasons why we need to ask the right questions as a church, but I would offer just a couple, both of which are connected to the whole business of hope.

We need to focus our attention and our conversation on the God revealed in Jesus Christ because, frankly, we *are boring our neighbors to death talking about ourselves all the time.*

The church, my friends, is not an infinitely fascinating subject nor is it infinitely adorable. But God is. People are not attracted by our conversations about ourselves, either our bragging about all of the good things we do and how much they’ll enjoy uniting with us, or our self-conscious, anxiety-driven begging of people to please, please, join us or else we’ll just die. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the more we talk about ourselves, the less interested in us our neighbors become.

Further, *the more we talk about ourselves, the more divided we become.* This makes sense, though, doesn’t it? That which brought us together is not ourselves. Christ called us together. Christ is what we have in common. Just as with the original disciples. A fisherman, a tax collector and a zealot (i.e., a peasant and a bureaucratic turncoat supporting the Roman occupation and a man sworn to bring down the Roman Empire) had no reason to join a voluntary association of like-minded individuals. They were not good prospects for the same club. They were drafted into the service of the reign of God by Christ. And so are we.

We have largely forgotten that. Even when we are trying to woo each other into staying in the church, or (more obviously) when we are trying to woo outsiders into joining, we are utterly unconvincing, because we talk up all the things about ourselves we hope make us appealing.

HOW TO REFOCUS

We have become a church self-absorbed. But that is not our true identity, and it doesn’t have to be our fate. Here is the word of hope, at that point where irony deepens into mystery.

While our anxious preoccupation with ourselves repels others and divides us, our focus on an infinitely adorable God draws others and heals us.

The less we focus on “the Church” and its lost powers and lost privileges and lost influence, and the more we

speak of the God revealed in and through Jesus Christ and the call of that God issued in every one of our hearts, the more people are likely to want to participate in what we belong to.

So, let’s shift our conversation a bit. We as Presbyterians are involved in a centuries-old “project.” I have called it the “Reformed Project.” The goal of this project is never finished. It was articulated by John Calvin 500 years ago when he said that all of the Reformers were really trying to do was to renew the authentic form of the church by focusing our attention on the God revealed in Jesus Christ. That continues to our project as Reformed Christians. [Michael Jenkins, *The Church Transforming* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 11-14]

The Reformed Project is portrayed movingly in Matthias Grunewald’s famous painting of the crucifixion in the Isenheim altarpiece. John the Baptist in that painting stands to the side of the crucified Jesus, his long, bony finger pointing *away from himself to Jesus*. Our church’s whole project is embodied, I think, in what one theologian called that “prodigious index finger” reminding the world that Christian faith *is not about us* but *is about the relentless love and the irresistible grace that God reveals in Jesus of Nazareth*.

When we have attended to the right questions, everything else comes into focus. And hope re-emerges.

Some years after Dietrich Bonhoeffer presented his lectures on Christology, Bonhoeffer sat alone in a prison cell, a political prisoner of the Nazis, an enemy of the state and isolated from many people in his own church. Writing the notes which he hoped one day would be the start of his own book on the church, Bonhoeffer complains about the preoccupations of his church. “Generally in the Confessing Church,” he writes of that movement in which he had worked so hard, “standing up for the church’s cause, but little personal faith in Christ. ‘Jesus’ is disappearing from sight. ...”

He raises concerns about the leadership of the Confessing Church, including his old theological colleague, Karl Barth: “Karl Barth and the Confessing Church have encouraged us to entrench ourselves persistently behind the ‘faith of the church’, and evade the honest question as to what we ourselves really believe. That is why the air is not quite fresh, even in the Confessing Church.”

It’s at this point that Bonhoeffer says what I believe we need so desperately to hear today: “The church is the church only when it exists for others. ... The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell others of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. In particular, our own church will have to take the field against the vices of hubris, power-worship, envy, and humbug, as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, purity, trust, loyalty, constancy, patience, discipline, humility, contentment and modesty. It must not under-estimate the importance of human example. ... It is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power.” [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 381-383]

WHERE TO BEGIN

So, where must we begin? To restore hope again in our church?

I believe we begin something like this:

Let me tell you about a God who created us not because God needed us, but because God’s love would not be contained.

Let me tell you about a God who has never given up on you, no matter what you have done, no matter how far from God you have roamed.

Let me tell you about a God who reveals God’s reign not by crushing those who would oppose God, but by giving his own life for those who rejected him.

Let me tell you about a God who forgives all and invites us to give all we are that others may be loved and forgiven.

Let me tell you about a group of people whose only excuse for gathering together is that they have found forgiveness and love and meaning and hope in a God bigger and more wonderful by all infinity than the best they can imagine.

Let me tell you about a people who know that the world’s suffering is not a riddle to be solved, but a reality to be healed in the name of the God whose emblem is not a sword but a cross.

There’s no other convincing reason – there’s really no other excuse – for a church.

We didn’t call ourselves into existence as a church. We still don’t. Christ called us. Christ called us to follow. He still does. And that is our hope.