



The Privilege of the Rooftop

Through a recent continuing education course went quite well according to most participants, one of them, in an anonymous evaluation, complained about my “making fun of less intellectual and more orthodox believers.” The criticism stung, because, if true, it would define a way of teaching that I, too, would decry—“putting down Christians of other traditions” (in the language of the participant) for the sake of cheaply buttressing one’s own argument.

In all candor, I don’t believe the criticism was true. I did criticize—quite sharply, in fact—some other Christians, but they were by no means “less intellectual” or “more orthodox.” They were those leaders who, as I see it, misuse their often considerable intellect to “decode” apocalyptic literature in ways that seem invariably to enhance their own wealth and their power—both religious and political—over their followers. They become the gnostic gurus, making themselves indispensable to the flock who cannot on their own properly decipher the texts. The problem, as I described it, is the curious reversal in which apocalyptic vision, historically a tool of the oppressed to provide hope for themselves and to undermine the powerful, becomes instead an instrument of those who have considerable power and who use it to threaten and seduce. Far from being “more orthodox,” such gnostic tendencies have, since the beginning, been recognized by Christian orthodoxy as dangerously heretical.

Why does this matter (other than possibly for my own self-justification!)? In my article later in this issue, I speak of David’s abuse of power, using his rooftop, his “place of privilege” (from which he spied upon Bathsheba), to exploit those he was called to protect and defend. It is a great temptation. Most, thank God, will not succumb to murder and adultery, as did David. But all leaders of religious communities know the lure of the cult of personality that seems to come with the territory, at least as frightening possibility. There is inherent power in leadership, but the distinction between the leader who empowers others, perhaps at the expense of an aggrandized self, and the one who empowers self at the expense of others soon becomes clear. By their fruits you shall know them.

I recently visited a congregation torn asunder by a self-empowering leader who was using some of the real issues that divide the opinions of Christians—even those of good will—to establish his own kingdom by, as I was told, inculcating fear and suspicion of any who disagreed with his positions on these matters. Here there was no longer good will but the “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, [and] factions” that Paul describes as “works of the flesh” (Gal 5:20). What became clear to me was the Bathsheba-like vulnerability of those congregants, a

vulnerability that arose from several sources. While by no means unintelligent or incompetent—especially in their own areas of endeavor—some were without practice in theological discourse and so unable themselves to nuance the issues at stake, leaving them at the mercy of someone who painted everything in black and white terms. Most had been raised in a tradition that reposed great trust in the pastor and the pastoral office, so were all too easily led astray by someone given—and abusing—that authority. (By “led astray,” I do not mean led to an informed conclusion on one side or another of a particular argument—something that could be quite responsibly done—but led rather to sin against the eighth commandment by failing to put the best construction on the statements of those who might disagree.) Some were genuinely fearful about broader societal trends and were easily “helped” to view the church simply as another arena in which the culture wars needed to be fought at all costs. Thoughtful sentences about individual issues were not fostered or entertained because the issues had become icons of competing worldviews in which particular content was no longer the point. Some had had little or no contact with Christians who did not look or think like themselves, so were more easily convinced that those who were different were also enemy.

All of us are vulnerable—in these ways and in others. But those of us called to be leaders in Christian communities are called to recognize not only our own vulnerabilities but also our extreme susceptibility to exploiting the vulnerability of others to our own advantage. The concern is as old as the recurrent biblical admonition against the false shepherds (e.g., Jer 23; Ezek 34; John 10; 1 Pet 5), an admonition that must be taken to heart in every generation by the shepherds themselves and those who exercise oversight over them. In the case of the congregation to which I refer, the pastor in question denies that anyone has the authority to shepherd the shepherds; but it’s one thing to make the perhaps defensible argument that there is only one pastoral office, all of its powers inhering in the local congregation, and quite another to argue that therefore the local pastor is subject to no checks and balances. Those false biblical shepherds called into question by Jesus and the prophets also seemed quite sure of themselves and their own integrity—all the more reason they needed an outside voice to call them to task.

The rooftop is a seductive and dangerous place. Don’t go there alone. Go only fully aware of the community of Christ’s people who remain ever present, even if unseen. Go only while maintaining the counsel of colleagues. Go only with the Scriptures firmly in hand, especially cognizant of their many frightening admonitions regarding the responsibility of leaders. And go only mindful that there is a rooftop above your own from which the Judge of all the earth watches—sometimes, alas, through tear-filled eyes.

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