

Nothing unsettles worldly power more than the golden rule.

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“Christ and Culture”

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With the smell of sulfur still in the air from Independence Day fireworks, it might be fun to mention how Jesus refused to be interested in creating new government, despite the pressures and temptations for him to politicize his movement. His disciples initially became disciples because they were zealots eager and armed for the overthrow of Herod’s corrupt court, the oppressive religious rulers in bed with civil authorities, and Roman cruelty.

What Jesus did instead was commit his life and death to fashioning a people into becoming faithful people, manifesting the new humanity. He, a true revolutionary, talked about souls, hearts, and minds rather than about causes or issues. No wonder Jesus frightened the politicians into crucifying him. Dangerously, Christ equips people to live according to God’s liberating essence – personal regeneration, building each other up, disobeying rules and exposing laws that exploit and limit humanity, mercy, compassion, justice, accountability, joy, grace, freeing us to live love’s potential. Nothing unsettles worldly power more than the golden rule.

I’ve always been chary of churches that pronounce that they are the true church and their views are what true Christians believe and practice. We’re not here to promote the church’s self-interest. I don’t need my church to mimic the Taliban.

Call me a relic, for my youthfully opinionated career detoured into what missionary, John Mackay, meant when he argued that “the purpose of the church isn’t to transform society but to transform the transformers of society.” How is this accomplished? Scripture points toward the church’s ministry of prophetic teaching and preaching. Rather than enforcing conformity, education draws forth possibilities. An apt definition for Christian Education’s goal is: “Life in the risen Lord.” We gather on Sunday so we can get to work as risen people from Monday to Saturday. Why else?

At the heart of my Reformed Tradition, which seeded the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution, beats the conviction that the “Lord is the Lord of the conscience,” meaning that no person, no special interest, no church, no civil authority can command me to comply with what they demand I believe if I believe what they demand contradicts the Word of God revealed by Christ. There’s the crucial condition. The sole litmus test to being a believer is that you grow in faith through repentance, you listen, learn, seek and strive to practice faithfully your confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. Such is our freedom to live for God, never independent from our responsibilities to be humane toward each other. Your beliefs are yours, such is the freedom of your individuality, but never is faith individualistic.

Our responsibility is to think theologically. For we also uphold: “Truth is in order to goodness.” We must wrestle to answer, admittedly provisionally, this question: how does my life in the risen Lord require me to respond to our time’s existential problems? This is how my church struggled to bring the gospel to bear on divisive issues, such as rebellion against King George III, slavery, equal rights for women, civil rights. This is how the church must continue to struggle to speak to our day’s vexing social

issues, not as self-righteous crusaders or zealots but as thoughtful and devout followers. If we boast that our efforts transform our culture, then we're saying we're saviors.

When I taught my confirmation classes, preparing 8<sup>th</sup> graders to consider making a profession of faith in Christ, I baited them, asking: Who is the head of the church? They, thralls to popular culture, usually answered that as pastor I was the head of the church. Wrong. The only head of the church is Christ. When the church institution or I demand obedience to what we pronounce as correct belief, we make the mistake of us thinking we have become the head of the church.

Among my sorrows is how we mislay this prophetic teaching ministry of the church. We issue self-validating slogans more than press intimately hard questions. We ill-serve our people when we declare preferences as divine decrees rather than challenging each person to choose to responsibly engage scripture, listening and learning from others and historical knowledge, so that each reflects upon the breadth, length, depth, and height of mature faithfulness. Our job is to foster occasions when the Spirit of Christ may provoke us into discerning how our views and actions may glorify God through our culture.

We do our job because we believe it is possible to cultivate, never impose, the kingdom of God on earth.