

Jesus Freaks: The Church and Her Prophets Need Each Other

by P. Andrew Sandlin

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever saves his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25).



It's easy to criticize the excesses of both the Jesus Movement and the Charismatic Movement of the late 1960s and early 70's, but many thousands converted in these movements (I have met quite a few) persist even today as strong Christians, often tempered by subsequent study of the Bible and orthodox theology and contact with institutional Christianity. The Charismatic Movement was attempting to recover, however naively at times, the tragic neglect of the Holy Spirit in the 20th-century Church. The Jesus Movement redirected attention to the very central person of our faith who had been obscured in both liberal and conservative Christianity. These movements criticizing the institutional church were both radical and prophetic.

Amid the radical individualism of the postmodern world, we hear renewed calls for institutional Christianity and its exalted view of the visible Church as the incarnation of Christ on earth (a hoary and venerated position of the Latin Church); a highly structured and ritualized liturgy in harmony with certain prominent sectors of the Church catholic; and an exaltation of medieval Christianity, its ecclesio-centric vision, and its Christian culture. This trend, in many ways a healthy reaction to our individualistic culture, offers one version of Christianity and cannot claim hegemony, as, indeed, no other version can. At major (but surely not all) points this expression wishes to maintain continuity with Christian history, just as it wishes (at points) to deviate from biblical Christianity. No one version of Christianity can claim that it alone represents the true faith; for this reason we need to be attuned to all sectors of the Church.

The Radicals and the Prophets -A frequent blind, or at least neglected, side in a highly institutionalized Christianity is its assessment of radical and prophetic elements, individuals and ministries that say and do holy things uncomfortable to institutionalists. Jesus himself was the most notorious example of this phenomenon, as were his early disciples, as well as Noah, Elijah

and the other Old Testament prophets. To remove the radical and prophetic elements of the Bible is to deracinate it. But valid institutions are in the Bible, too - the “objective” community of Old Testament Israel and New Testament churches; and it is worth noting that the Lord not once commanded separation from these institutions, even in their most apostate condition. On the other hand, he reprimanded these communities for not listening to the “radicals” and prophets he raised up to say truthful but uncomfortable things (Matthew 23:29-35). Prophets need institutions to keep them accountable, and institutions need prophets to keep them zealous. The institutions should not excommunicate her prophets, and the prophets should not separate from their institutions.

The primitive Church was a radical and prophetic “eschatological community,” looking for the imminent end of the age and the return of the Lord. When the Lord did not return, this fervor cooled. The Latin father Augustine later accounted for this delay by constructing a Christian philosophy of history, something the primitive Church could scarcely have conceived. Augustine laid the foundations of the medieval world by equating the institutional Church with the kingdom of God. While the Bible itself will not sustain this simplistic formulation, we can credit Augustine with faithfully highlighting the institutional dimension of the faith. A balanced faith will preserve both of these elements - Augustine’s institutionalism and the primitive Church’s radicalism.

Jesus Freaks Wanted -Among the radicals and prophets we need today are “Jesus Freaks,” Christians committed to their Lord in a white-hot passion that burns away almost all dross and rebukes and awakens the Church to its spiritual torpor. These Christians will be always zealous, frequently odd, and sometimes erratic - and the Church must not live without them. In recent times we think of musicians Keith Green and U2’s Bono, authors Francis Schaeffer and Gene Edwards, pastors A. W. Tozer and John Stott, theologians Abraham Kuyper and John Frame, and evangelists Leonard Ravenhill and John Armstrong, who fit this category. They break many of the established categories and “business as usual” to awaken the Church to her main obligation - love for and fidelity to the person of Christ. Like his own parents in Jerusalem (Luke 2:43-44), it’s easy to miss Jesus in the bustle of religiosity. Religiosity is one of the great enemies of Jesus, and we should not be surprised that Jesus reserved his severest denunciation for the most religious individuals of his age (Matthew 23).

In reaction to the (secular) radical individualism of our age we dare not squelch those (godly) radical individuals without whose courageous testimony the Church will drift (again) into a pious, ritualistic apostasy. Let’s have holy enthusiasts - young people who play loud steel guitars and sing off-beat songs and indict “The Establishment,” ecclesiastical as well as civil, for its hypocrisy; theologians who slay sacred traditional cows in pointing us back to Jesus unmasked from cultural accretions; pastors who lead their churches away from a comfortable conservatism to a city-shaking faith pulling down Satanic strongholds; missionaries who do not merely plant churches and stay put but who also penetrate entire societies with a conquering gospel. Change in both church and culture will spring from radicals like John Wesley, who never left the Anglican Church but whose relevant faith, if not always accurate theology, reshaped the consciousness of a nation.

We cannot expect that a Christian culture will follow merely a careful, scholarly restructuring of civil law. We need Jesus freaks, zealots for the Lamb who will surrender anything, go anywhere, rebuke anyone, to press the claims of Jesus. This is not a message that institutional Christianity is eager to accept, but it is one without which it cannot long survive as a driving, godly force. But may the radicals and prophets always love the Church, love her members even in their depravity, as Jeremiah loved and longed for the apostates to whom he prophesied. May the radicals never leave the Church in disgust, but pray and grieve over her - until justice spawns victory.

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