

Seeking the Kingdom; Bowing to the King

The following article reflects part of my own personal journey from the independent evangelical church into a sacramental world view in general. It was written around 2001 when I had entered the Charismatic Episcopal Church, and shows where I was at that time. It is my desire not to offend anyone in the independent or loosely organized evangelical churches in describing this journey. In fact, I am deeply conscious of my debt to my old-time Gospel past, and consider myself to be evangelical in heart and soul. I also realize that there are many good Christians serving in the independent evangelical churches, and are doing so with a good conscience before our Lord. Consider the following as the ponderings of a Christian brother searching for answers to the hard questions that we all face in our complex culture.

I happen to be American. This is a profound fact about me that is woven deep into my being. This is not a casual fact; the land upon which I was born and sired is inseparable from who I am. The famous words of Sir Walter Scott apply to all noble souls, whatever country they hale from:

Breathes there a man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!

I am glad for my country and the democratic ideals it stands for. This has been a place where my grandparents emigrated to, the land of opportunity, the land of freedom. Opportunity and freedom are certainly important things, and my family, though humble blue collar workers of the latter end of the Industrial revolution, made the most of them. Indeed, given my lack of scholarly promise early on, I would most probably not have had the opportunity to go to college and on to further graduate studies in another country, especially one modeled on educational systems where only a few can place in the universities. This is also a country where my grandparents became Christians, having the freedom to openly raise their families in the faith. I owe a lot to my country.

Still, it seems to me that even early on I felt lost in the vastness of American democracy, one of an unconnected crowd, or like one of many cream colored chevies coming off a 1950's assembly line. There was no sense of belonging, no identity in a land called the melting pot, nothing truly transcendent to aspire to and hold on to. I was brought up in a large independent Church where the Gospel was preached, but even this didn't give me a sense of being part of something meaningful, or what is more, something sacred. It has slowly dawned upon me over the years that I was searching for something that I had heard of all my life, but never could connect to - the Kingdom of God! It is amazing how such a prevalent biblical notion is lost to us Americans, and the whole westerner culture as a whole. And things are not getting any easier.

The problem is that we have no personal and meaningful understanding of "King" and "Kingdom". Our whole world view is shaped by the great revolutions of the 18th Century, our own and the French, where we did away with the old world hierarchical structures, and exulted the individual, proclaiming equality for all. "Freedom" has become the great and sacred rally word of the Western world, and is interpreted to mean freedom from anyone meddling into my personal affairs. We are a culture of individualists who have loosely banded together just enough to protect ourselves from those chaotic forces outside that would destroy our individual rights, our freedom, and our fun. There is simply no room for kings and their kingdoms; they belong to fairytales! This attitude tends to be the common creed of us all, our rock-bottom identity, Christian and pagan alike.

In the last few decades, however, we see that our loose political structures can no longer keep the chaos out. The freedoms of one group impinge upon another, and what was once more or less a unity, is now cracking up into bits and pieces. The world no longer seems to be a safe place, even for relatively affluent and powerful Americans. Our excessive individualism has alienated ourselves from one another, and we find ourselves alone in a sea shifting in crazy and unpredictable ways. Rootless because of our inability to commit to anyone or anything, we have come to the very doors of what seems to be the ultimate end of democracy gone bad, chaos.

This has created a crisis for all groups of Christians in the West, both Protestant and Catholic.. Perhaps because the grass seems greener on the other side of the fence, I remember feeling

jealous of Roman Catholics when I was young. I knew very little of Catholicism, but it seemed to me that Catholics with their hierarchy, tight large families, mysterious ceremonies, convents and monasteries all belong to something united, something bigger than the individual, something sacred. Now I see that indeed the structure of the Kingdom was there, but the chaos of individualism had long been at work eroding the once mighty edifice of the Catholic Church in the Western world.

Given my evangelical background, the question I finally came to was, are we essentially “saved” individuals who have a “personal” relationship with God, and band together loosely in like-minded, independent societies we call churches where we sing a few culturally relevant songs, receive a teaching, and plug our kids into a program that hopefully will protect them from evil things ever ready to pounce and devour? Underneath such a religious identity is another, often unquestioned one, and that is one of personal freedom. No one has any authority over me and my family! I will not obey anyone or anything that crosses my will or my way of doing things. My relationship with God is real and personal, and I will share my testimony when called upon, but don’t ask me to tithe! Do not pry into my personal life, how I spend my time, or what I do for entertainment. I am an American! I bow to no one! Give me a loosely structure service where I can be free to be who I am! I am “justified” by grace through faith! I do not have to “do” anything in church - formality is contrived and dreadfully “out”, spontaneity is natural and rock-n-roll is “in”! I want to come away feeling alive!

It is beginning to dawn on many that this attitude is essentially culturally driven, and reflects the core values of our society around us. They are not Christian values, and they do not reflect the biblical world-view, nor that of the Church throughout most of her two-thousand year existence. We have confused democracy with our faith, and have distanced ourselves from Christ our King and His Kingdom, refusing to pay due homage in any real and meaningful way. We have opted for a loosely committed club in which we all have a vote and call it “church”. If certain individuals wish to make more of it than what it really is, they may be offended at the lack of commitment of others. Try as we might, there is no true unity or sense of belonging to something bigger than what meets the eye. In the end, we are left to ourselves; it is the American way.

There has got to be another way! But where? In my personal journey, I have always believed in the Church, but never felt that I really experienced it, at least in the way that my soul longed for. This longing has driven me to a life long study of Scripture and the reading of the Church Fathers. My journey has brought me and my family to the Charismatic Episcopal Church, a wonderful place of treasures both old and new. I have found, however, that this way has been very costly - it costs us our freedom as it has been culturally understood. To enter genuinely into the CEC is to enter into a sacramental world view, and leave behind the rationalistic, self-centered world view of the western world. In a sacramental world view, people bind themselves and their families by sacred oaths to God and each other that cannot be broken without dire consequences. In these ceremonies of baptism, confirmation, the Holy Eucharist, and holy orders, Christ the King binds Himself to us, we to Him and each other. In these sacraments God's grace is conferred upon us all, empowering us to keep these vows. We enter into a new family, and a new sense of being, belonging, and purpose floods our souls. We come out of the chaos into the warm glow of Kingly light.

For most Westerners that have been so deeply indoctrinated by democratic ideals, however, this would be a difficult step to take. However "saved" we may feel, and however true and real our personal relationship with Jesus may be, we still understand ourselves as free and independent individuals. But freedom that is superficially embraced as "doing what I want as long as it doesn't hurt someone else" is no freedom at all. Freedom in the biblical sense is a freedom given to us by God to aspire to the high ideals placed before us. It means freedom to embrace the good, the true, and the beautiful as Scripture and nature reveals these things to the depths of our souls. A free Christian is in fact a servant of Christ who has laid down his or her life to the King, and become a servant of His servants. He is one who has bowed at the name of Jesus, and confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11)

Now every true Christian will, of course, agree with this idea of freedom in theory. However, when it comes to practice, a more instinctive, primal urge takes over and re-defines the Gospel commands. This instinctive, primal urge is freedom and independence as it has been fed to us from our culture since our infancy. We create churches with no sacramental vows, liturgy,

authority structures, and linkage to the traditions of the past, and condemn these things as contrary to the spirit of “salvation by grace through faith alone”, the only lens by which we look at Scripture. These things are not unbiblical - they seem to us as un-American, and that is the real reason why we reject them.

It takes, therefore, a radical step of redefining ourselves and our allegiance to come in out of the chaos of our culture. For me and my family, part of this radical step was to move from the independent evangelical world into the CEC with its Kingdom values and structures. Although it is possible to protect one’s individualism and autonomy in any church, we have found the CEC as a place where we could commit ourselves. We no longer feel like billiard balls bouncing off one another on a pool table. We are part of something bigger than ourselves. We are the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, connected and bonded to one another and the spiritual realm, forever. We belong to an eternal kingdom whose earthly structures and liturgies reflect the structure and movements in the heavenlies. We have found that if we cannot submit ourselves to our ecclesiastical authorities as God has ordained in the structure of His Church, it is highly unlikely that we can submit ourselves to Christ the King.

There are many Christians yearning for a truly holy experience of the Church that want to come in from the cold chaos of western individualism and self-centeredness, yet is warmed with the glowing coals of evangelical fervor. It is not my intention here to tell such Christians where to go, and to tell them that their journey must be like mine. I would like to encourage the reader, however, not to give up on the journey, and settle for something that is less than what God is urging them onward to find. Keep searching for a home, an identity, a place of order, beauty, mystery and worship. Push on to the attainment of true freedom, not as the world defines freedom, but as our Lord has promised “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

By God’s grace, my family and I have been on this journey towards radical freedom. It has taken us not only to the CEC, but also to the LIJ community. Much of what we have shed, and are still shedding, are layers of cultural baggage that weighed us down without our knowing it. We have Jesus, not only as our Savior, but as our King, and we are gaining a deepening

understanding of His Kingdom in heaven and on earth, and our participation in it. As we go along, we catch glimpses, ever so subtle but real nevertheless, of the morning for which we all long for, the morning of the just King and His rule, a morning without clouds, and the silvery dew on the grass shining in the rays of uncreated light (II Samuel 23:3b.4).