

This essay is part of a continuing series of posts by members of the Institute's Company of Teachers. They are designed to demonstrate the relevance of the Reformed tradition to the challenges facing us today. This contribution is the final one by a long-standing member of the Company, who in retirement is leaving the East Coast. He will be missed.

“Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem”: In Praise of Institutions

The Lord God in the Old Testament is a jealous God. He does not brook much competition. Few can speak for him – a few angels, Moses, a few prophets (and there are more false prophets than there are true ones.) There aren't a lot of mediators between us and God. God is quick to take the measure of the ones that do exist, putting them in their place when the people make more of them than they should. For example, they thought that because God dwelled in the Temple that God would always protect Jerusalem. Jeremiah informed them otherwise. They needed to focus on God alone, and not trust any of the intermediaries.

This makes Psalm 122 especially striking. It is in praise of Jerusalem. It bids prayer for the peace of Jerusalem and hopes that “they prosper who love you.”

Surprising, but sensible, and very aware of how humans live, even in a theocracy. For we live within cities, and we depend upon mediating institutions to flourish. Without them, we flounder. “For the sake of my relatives and friends, I will say ‘Peace be within you,’” the psalmist says. Indeed.

Among the many things that we need to worry about in the contemporary church, and in the culture as a whole, the chief one ought to be the disintegration of those institutions that support church and culture, and make it what it is or isn't.

Now, what constitutes an institution as I mean it is broad. It comes in at least two levels. There are particular concrete institutions – the University of X, N High School. There is also the institution of American educational practice in general. This involves the way we as Americans, for example, teach, directly and indirectly, how to live well in a liberal democracy. For example, in America, as John Dewey once pointed out, we vote on everything, beginning somewhere in kindergarten, if not before. Doing this is not so very important to organizing the society of five year olds, but it does teach five year olds how to approach their participation in our society as a whole. It affects how they see themselves and others. Other nations don't do this the way we do. In a similar way, we have large institutions of justice, and we then have specific courts to administer it. We have religion, and we have churches. While we can separate the larger institution from the specific one in theory, in practice they go hand in glove. We learn the big ideas in the particular schools; the schools reflect our ideals. We are religious within churches. Or not. Thus, big and small have mutual effect. If there is a degradation in the big institution, say, of truth telling, it will affect how we teach it in the particular institution, and how we teach it in the particular will affect how we see the big institution. If we don't teach it at all, or find a place for its exercise, the habit will disappear. Furthermore, when there is any disjunction or incoherency between the two, both tend toward degradation. In that case, nothing then builds up the habits that we need to live together. Moreover, nobody quite knows how to practice them,

either, or they just quit believing in them. All this is why institutions are so important. They give us the habits of life that we need, and they give us also the opportunity to practice those habits. They are how we interact with other people, and learn how to interact with them.

So, I think it becomes clear what sort of danger we are in when we lose our institutions, or no longer believe in them. Our life together becomes chaotic. There is nothing between us and the exercise of power.

I will leave it to others to apply the lesson to civil society. It isn't all that hard to do the math right now. But I do want to get us to pay attention to the church. More and more I have found it to be the case that even as we extol the virtues of Christian community, that we have lost the mediating institutions that we need to build it and maintain it. We don't even understand their necessity. Or, of the ones that there still are, we no longer know much about them, or how to work within them. For example, as Protestants, we believe that the Word of God animates our life together, and it is given in the Bible. But who in the mainline churches knows much about the Bible at all? And why is this? There is little Bible reading in mainline homes, Sunday School is preempted by soccer practice. How many children have ever sat through a worship service before confirmation class, as we take them out of worship each Sunday? Or, as Presbyterians, we have a very specific sort of community and governance. It is not arbitrary, but really the expression of our spirituality. We believe that everybody has a calling. Governance and how we make decisions and run our life together is a matter of cooperating. It is not a matter of checks and balances but one of shared callings. To work, it depends, *in concreto*, in trusting committees, in not being a self designated leader, in letting others do what they are called to do, and responsibly stepping up on what we are called to do. At its root, it should take all the edges off our hard bitten individualism. Sometimes it works that way, but there are fewer and fewer people who understand it, and who in their service to the church have been able to teach it others. More and more the habits of the secular work force are becoming the skills we think we need in the church.

There was for Presbyterians in the distant past a cradle to grave set of institutions by which one could learn and practice the faith: Sunday School, Presbyterian colleges, Westminster Fellowships, Mariners, Bible Studies, etc. Those were not just things to do. They were all mediating institutions, whereby we learned the faith, but learned it by being with each other in a highly specific way. There are not many of them left, and what there is is spotty. Our communities show the effect of that loss.

Now, I have had arguments with church leaders who have seen a concern for institutions as being precisely what our problem is. Institutions make us hide bound; we become, like the people of Jerusalem who thought the Temple's mere presence would always protect them no matter what they did, presumptuous about what God is committed to. We never think about what is required now, we only try to repeat what we did in the past, even though it is no longer effectual. Fair enough. We do a lot of that. Yet, even the new needs institutions of varying sorts to establish itself, to teach people, to succor them. Without them, we end up constantly living in a world of chaos, hoping that each day God will bring order to it. We end up looking for constant miracles. God never penetrates and permeates our lives and minds, God just ends up reconverting us every day.

I suppose there are many reasons why the institutions that support the church are in a state of erosion. But as we are concerned about our community, and the ability to live out the gospel in community, we need to recognize that whatever these forces might be, that the damage they are doing is to damage to our supporting institutions. We need to recognize how important such institutions are, and we need to take care of them, and even reinvent them where they have disappeared.

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