

RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP IN A SECULAR SOCIETY:
ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

By Michelle Tooley

A paper delivered at the Annual Session of the ASBCM

June 16,1995

It could almost be happening today. The church was influential in politics and lines between the church and state were very fuzzy. Maybe they didn't have a Christian Coalition revealing a platform but they did have religious leaders putting stamps of approval on candidates, parties, and platforms. And there were fears--economic fears that drive people and countries to exclude and ostracize and oppress. In the beginning their policies were similar to proposition 187 in California. They weren't bad people, but they were afraid of people who were different--Jews, gypsies, 7th Day Adventists, and homosexuals. And we know that fear can prompt people to do almost anything. And churches had power--maybe not like Baptists today, with a Baptist in the White House and two top leaders of the House and Senate--but the church had power. Their logic ran something like this: Couldn't they influence society more by being at the right hand of state leaders, by having money and power and privilege?

Some people were troubled by the convenient marriage between church and state and the way the church had lost its prophetic mission. They were also troubled by an increasing

emphasis in society on militarism and violence, and a patriotism that was an uncritical allegiance to the government. These folks-- the best known was Dietrich Bonhoeffer-- formed a confessing church. As a natural outgrowth of loyalty to God, the Confessing Church stood tirelessly against oppression and injustice. They understood the cost of discipleship and the connection between spirituality and social justice.

In several of his books, Bonhoeffer fleshed out his dreams for a church in a secular society, what he called in *Letters and Papers from Prison* "a world come of age." His picture of church was not complete, but what we know of Bonhoeffer's dreams for the church are relevant for the church in the 21st century.

Bonhoeffer's church will be known by its social ethic. The church will stand in solidarity with those who are marginalized and powerless. Christians will share in God's sufferings as they serve a weak and powerless God. The church must act concretely, not whispering pretty words of love, but acting in specific ways to love those who are neighbor or enemy.

The church's task is to transform society--not by imitating it, not by being naive about the powers and principalities, but by active engagement in the world. This model calls for the church to be prophetic, for the forms of discipleship to be incarnational, for the Christian church to transform secular society. Bonhoeffer called for a church that practices *radical discipleship*,

incarnational discipleship--a church that makes a difference in the world, a church that tackles unashamedly as part of our mission the real problems of the world. This is the kind of discipleship that we must practice in the 21st century.

I have a dream that Baptist churches in the 21st century can become active participants in the struggle against oppression and injustice in our secular society. I see the untapped potential of Baptists--26 million in the U.S. alone. We are all tired of the Baptist battles that wound people we love, sap our energy, and distract Baptist from missions and evangelism. If only 10% of Baptist practiced Bonhoeffer's kind of discipleship, their influence could radicalize the church.

Baptists--in rural communities, county-seat towns, and large cities--are not callous, uncaring individuals. Based on my experience, which may or may not be representative of other Baptists throughout the United States and world, I found people eager to serve God, with a genuine concern for the needs of the world. But in spite of genuine concerns, most churches spend a majority of their time maintaining their regular programs, training for special events, or studying about needs, not working in programs that meet basic human needs.

How can Baptists be radical disciples and respond to the needs of a hurting world? First of all, Baptist should maintain their emphasis on Bible study and teaching. Certainly, knowledge of the

Bible and application of biblical teachings are necessary tools in the struggle against injustice. As Ron Sider says, we have been selective about our use of the Bible, focusing on Romans instead of Micah; we have not always been consistent in our application of the scriptures concerning social justice. We have often practiced what Dale Moody called kangaroo exegesis, hopping over passages that very concretely tell us how to work for justice--or we have spiritualized passages like the Sermon on the Mount, robbing them of their power for our lives.

Only if we are ignorant or unconcerned will we deny God's concern for the poor. Baptists can learn from the Israelites whose relationship with God dramatically effected their response to widows, orphans, strangers, neighbors, servants, and the poor. The Bible continually calls Christians to affirm the relationship between faith and action, to practice a faith that feeds the hungry, clothes those without clothing, visits prisoners, and welcomes the stranger.

Second, to have an authentic ministry in our world we must articulate a broader vision, a vision that includes people of all economic groups and ethnic backgrounds as equal partners. This vision must affirm social change as a way of working for Kingdom values. The grounding for this vision is a part of our history as Baptist but it is a story that needs to be retold and reappropriated. Baptists need to remember and affirm that we worked for religious

liberty with people like Isaac Baccus who helped write the Bill of Rights, giving voice to human rights concerns based on Biblical principles of justice and freedom. We need to remember that Baptists work with the poor with people like Muriel Lester, a radical disciple and English Baptist who transformed her world. After her conversion experience, she participated in a Sunday School campaign in London. Part of the campaign involved visiting the slums and discussing how to convert the poor. It was clear to her, why not live with them; so she lived with the poor in East London and linked her work with the poor and workers. We need to tell stories of other Baptists who work for peace, build hospitals, teach adults to read, and say no to all forms of injustice.

Clearly, it is not that Baptists are not ministering to the poor and oppressed, because men and women throughout the United States are involved in ministry and service, but justice-actions are not seen as central concerns that translate into action for most local congregations. The author of John says that Christians are known by their fruit. The fruit of Baptists in the 21st century should be ministry that transcends racial and class barriers with justice as a central concern. Baptists have been good about statements of faith and verbally affirming the principles found in the Bible; application in our social context would result in more justice emphases--hospitality to the stranger and ministry to the poor and oppressed. We must walk the walk as well as talk the

talk.

Third, Baptists in the 21st century must acknowledge the *centrality of suffering*. Both the church in South Africa and the church in Germany had Christians who not only lived out their commitments but were tortured, jailed, and killed as a result of their loyalties to God and the oppressed. My life has been radically changed and my faith challenged the last five years as I have had the privilege of accompanying refugees in war-torn areas of Guatemala. Guatemalans refined their theology in light of their experiences of suffering and struggle; their models for life and ministry are Jesus and the early church--persons who were no strangers to suffering and persecution. Guatemalans' faith, their hope, their lack of vengeance and hate are ever-present reminders that they are strengthened by the presence of the living God and that this land is sanctified by the blood of martyrs who have given their lives in the struggle for justice.

So what are the ethical challenges of the 21st century, struggles that the church should not only be aware of but also involved in?

First, *the reality of economic injustice*. Poverty is growing exponentially--today 1 of 5 children in the US goes to bed hungry. In Waco, Texas and Louisville, Kentucky, 1 of 4 children is hungry. To be credible, we must address the problems of poverty and homelessness--especially since we see the rapid erosion of the

social network.

One place we see economic injustice clearly is in the problems of the inner city; it is not enough to send money or care packages. Baptist centers and occasional mission trips are worthwhile endeavors but they are not enough. The church must discover that there are residency requirements if we are to make a difference in the inner city. The call of the church is to community development, not by quick-fix solutions but by empowering people and by providing neighbors who care. Our call is not to move out of the inner city but rather to reinvest ourselves in neighborhoods that have become drug-infested ghettos. The church concerned about justice will become actively involved in education of adults and children in the inner city. We will do something about the paralyzing poverty of housing projects, about the lack of hope and a culture of poverty.

Second, *sexism in church and society*. Clearly, most campus minister have been midwives of grace to the women in their midst, but we still need to confront this structural evil and injustice. The statistics are staggering--women constitute half of the world's population, perform nearly two-thirds of its work hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property.¹ There is a pattern of violence against women that is seen in rape camps of Bosnia, prostitution, sex tourism, dowry death, sexual harassment, child

pornography, and domestic violence. In the U.S. two out of three adults living below the poverty level are women and more than one-third of female-headed families are poor. This spring the Glass Ceiling Commission revealed that even though the last 20 years have brought more job opportunities for women in the workplace at some levels, women only represent 5% of senior managers.²

Sexism--exclusion or oppression because of gender--doesn't just happen in the larger society; it happens within our churches and BSUs. I denied this for many years--after all, church and BSU had been a warm, loving place for me. We sang "Wherever He Leads I'll Go" and talked about the urgency of the Great Commission. I confess that I explained away systemic gender exclusion. When I experienced discrimination, I never called it by its correct name; instead, I decided that there must be something wrong with me. Even when I became aware of differences, some seemed too humorous to be taken seriously. For example, GAs (Girls' Auxiliary) versus RAs (Royal Ambassadors). I remember an experience at camp in Texas when as a 9 year old, I felt God leading me to foreign missions. I made a decision for full-time Christian service during the decision service. After everyone gave me hugs and affirmation, the camp pastor patted me on the back and said, "Honey, what you're doing is nice but you'll grow out of it." Also in my theology and ethics classes on the college campus, I hear story after story of women who have left the church because it

isn't relevant. These are not women who want to be a senior pastor or church staff; these women feel that they are second-class citizens in today's church. Galatians 3:28 should be a Magna Charta that empowers us to include all persons regardless of race, gender, or political persuasion.

Third, *the sin of racism*. This semester I taught an interdisciplinary seminar to seniors at Bellarmine College, a private liberal arts college. The section on racism left me very disturbed. I heard such comments as, "Why are we still talking about racism--that was a problem in the 60s? Why are African-Americans still talking about slavery and the problems of discrimination--live in the present not in the past. there aren't many African-Americans here so we aren't racist. Whites haven't benefitted from racism--it's blacks who have gotten all the privileges." And this same semester a police officer stopped Nick, a young African-American boy from my church--good teenage boy. The officer put a pistol to Nick's head--Nick still has nightmares about it.

Fourth, *the escalation of violence and our propensity for violent solutions*. Of course violence isn't new but it is growing exponentially, especially in the U.S.. The amount of violence in our culture should be troubling to all who follow the Prince of Peace. In the US someone commits a forcible rape every 6 minutes, a murder every twenty-five minutes, a robbery every 58

seconds, an aggravated assault every 38 seconds--and these statistics only reflect the reported crimes.³ Most studies estimate that only half of the victims report their crimes. At the present murder rate, 1 out of every 100 males will end his life by being murdered. As a society we seem fascinated by violence--just look at the following of the OJ Simpson trials or the "entertainment" of Desert Storm. Movies need more and more violence to keep satisfied customers. To be radical disciples in this society and especially on our college campuses, we must find ways to reduce violence and make peace.

Where do we get the strength to struggle against economic injustice, racism, sexism, and violence? From the power of the living God at work in us. In one of her books Annie Dillard discusses the kind of power we have available to us:

On the whole I do not find Christians outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?

Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.

It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.⁴

Dillard understands that the Christian life is a serious endeavor and that God wants to equip us with all that we need to change the world. Let us draw on this power for the ethical challenges of the 21st century.

Like the children of Israel, we don't have to go it alone or run our own show. We join together and march to the wilderness strengthened by the God of our mothers and our fathers. There are no magic carpets; our journey is full of difficulties, dangers, and crises. But we go knowing that Christ is our companion, our light and our salvation. May we have the grace and the courage to follow where He leads, secure that He will never leave us or forsake us but will continue to empower us for the journey.

NOTES

1. Hannelore Schroder, "The Economic Impoverishment of Mothers Is the Enrichment of Fathers," in *Women, Work, and Poverty*, ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Anne Carr (English language edition), and Marcus Lefebure (Edinburg: T. and T. Clark, LTD, 1987), p. 10.
2. "Men Still Reign in Corporate World," *The Courier Journal*, March 1, 1995, A-1.
3. United State Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Justice, 1986), p. 6.
4. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.