

GUEST EDITORIAL

Criteria for Judging Actions Within the Body of Christ

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In *Universitas*, volume three, number two, March, 1975, an article appeared by David McKenna entitled "The Legitimate Role of Student Government in the Christian College." In this article Dr. McKenna describes two basic institutional models at work in Christian colleges, one called "power-driven" and one called "purpose-driven."

He describes his "power-driven" model as:

a pyramid. At the top is the governing board which has ultimate authority and responsibility for the *policy* of the institution. As the pyramid widens, authority is delegated to the president and chief executive officer. In turn he delegates authority to other administrators, if he follows the principle that authority should flow to function.¹

When this is spelled out completely, it means that:

Students are at the bottom of the authority line. After the pieces of power have been distributed at the higher levels, precious little is left for the students. Keep in mind, however, the responsibility is also minimal at the student level. It is realistic to say that students have little authority and little responsibility in an organizational hierarchy With limited authority, student government tends to invent functions as entrees to power or to look for pieces of power lying around unclaimed. In their frustration they usually fail and return to revising their constitution or spinning wheels of social programs.²

Therefore, McKenna sees the power-driven model as subversive to the basic purposes of a Christian college.

McKenna describes the "purpose-driven" model as follows:

Christian colleges claim to be driven by purpose not power. If so, the role of the governing units within the organization are purpose-driven. In this case, purpose is used to identify the mission and the objectives of the institution. If the purpose is known

and operable, it can determine the dynamics of the organization. If it is hidden, blurred, or unaccepted, the internal dynamics of organization will naturally degenerate into structural protectionism and power struggles. Assuming that purpose determines the dynamics of organization in a Christian college, a purpose-driven model of governance is the starting point for introducing change.³

Now, if these basic statements are abstracted to general principles, they might read something like this:

- (1) Purpose, not power, is the underlying structure of any Christian institution or organization.
- (2) Power-structured institutions will become self-oriented and self-perpetuating, possibly to the disregard of their purposes.
- (3) Christian institutions by definition would exist to do the will of God, and if they become "power-driven" institutions they have subverted their own purpose to some extent.
- (4) Purpose-driven institutions will automatically generate power and strength whereas power-driven structures tend to divide an already weakening power structure and are genetically self-destructive.
- (5) All decisions and directions made or given in a Christian institution should be judged in the light of purpose and double-checked to determine whether purpose is being subverted by power.
- (6) These judgments in a Christian community should be communal judgments and the community or institution should be self-regulating or self-discriminating as to its functioning as a body in light of I Corinthians, chapters 12-14, and other significant passages.

A quick look at three instances in the Gospels should help us see how Jesus looked upon purpose and power as they functioned in people's lives. In Mark 8:31-33 after Peter's disclosure of Jesus' identity as the Christ, Jesus tells His disciples of His coming death. Peter rebukes Him and in return is rebuked by Jesus, though somewhat indirectly, because Jesus responds with these words: "Get behind me Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men," (RSV). Peter has aligned himself with Satan in his words to Jesus. Now in this alignment is what might be termed "cross-purpose," that is, Peter's purposes are contrary ideas to God's basic intention of the Incarnation. So he receives a strong rebuke.

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In a later passage, Mark 10:35-45, James and John approach Jesus about being seated on His right and left hands in His kingdom. This is obviously a power-play on their part, but notice that the rebuke they receive instructs and corrects them more than it chastises them. From the ensuing conversation between Jesus and the two brothers the writer reveals that they are in accord or willing to be in accord with God's basic intention both for Jesus and themselves. So their play for power is genetically destructive, but not inherently as was Peter's rebuke to Jesus. Therefore, the rebuke they receive is milder. Why? Because power may be reguided and corrected if basic purposes are unified, but power will only be destructive if the parties involved are at cross-purpose.

In Mark 14:3-9 Jesus affirms in the most positive way the servant role of the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment. She breaks it open and bathes His head in it. Jesus says of her, "wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." She was at one with the purposes of God in honoring His Son.

From these three incidents can be distilled certain principles for judging actions and decisions within any Christian institution or local parish.

- (1) Is it one with God's purpose in redeeming a lost humanity?
- (2) Is it a servant-like decision, one which will bring more loving service within the body or cause the body to reach out in loving service?
- (3) Does it have self-seeking characteristics, simply protecting the status quo, protecting the hand at the expense of the eye?
- (4) Is it open and in light for all the body to see, or is it clandestine, known only to the higher-ups?
- (5) Does it bring balanced power and authority throughout the body, or does it disenfranchise parts of the body as unimportant or unnecessary?
- (6) Is this decision trust-engendering or trust-thwarting? Does it say to part of the body, "we really can't trust you, so we are restricting you," or does it admit oneness of purpose and the trust that oneness brings?

In light of these criteria, let us examine a hypothetical situation which might occur in any local parish ministry, and what direction these criteria might provide in dealing with the situation. For instance, a small

congregation of 120 have a number of people who receive a “tongues” experience. What kind of response would be Christ-like on the part of the pastor in ministering responsibly to the whole body?

First, the question must be asked concerning God’s purpose for redeeming lost humanity. Do the actions of the people involved in the “tongues” experience cause serious problems in maintaining an evangelistic outreach, or are they winning people to God through Jesus Christ? Have their tithes suddenly stopped coming in, or are they more faithful than previously in their giving to the local church? Has their giving widened to include other Christian charities and organizations? Are they more zealous for the things of God than previous to their experience? Do they have a new hunger for the Word of God and are they attempting to judge their experience in the light of Scripture? Has this experience made them more open or more exclusive to the body of Christ?

These will not be easy questions to answer, nor will quick answers do. They are questions of time and nurture. If, after a period of time, a pastor can answer most or all of them in a positive way, then he should carefully consider any actions of a negative sort against these people because their lives are bearing fruit for God’s kingdom. Any persons who display oneness with the purpose of God call us to a very compassionate, open, and careful weighing of the balances concerning their actions, lest we find ourselves with those who would have sold the alabaster box.

But suppose these people have certain exclusive tendencies. They are forming cliques and their support of local activities drops in favor of the “more spiritual” meetings. One must always ask the first question first, “Are they still one with the purpose of God?” If so, then wise counsel, love and patient handling are called for on all sides. They should be gently admonished as one would any brother or sister who has an unhealthy emphasis or trend forming in their life. Some feel that if a person doesn’t leave a printed tract in every restaurant, then he or she isn’t quite spiritual. But a pastor doesn’t immediately call a meeting of the church board just because some of his people have started leaving tracts all over town. Rather, he looks and listens to see whether they are being obnoxious with their witnessing, whether they are pressuring fellow parishioners to do this as well, whether they are having secret tract meetings where only those who pass out tracts are really welcome. If so, then he tries to reason and counsel with them to be more loving and open. So it should be with “tongues people.”

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But what does it mean when the big cannons start firing and someone says, “Tongues are of the devil!” or “No one is truly baptized in the Spirit unless they speak in tongues!” Here we have the classic cross-purpose examples. Like Jesus, people know that cross-purposes are incompatible and cannot co-exist. But unlike Jesus, people tend to want to make the other person at cross-purpose with themselves; then they just cross each other off their spiritual lists and are done with it. It is the simple way out. It’s like saying, “Sure, you can believe that way if you want to; everybody has to be wrong sometime.” It ends all dialogue. There is no more room for discussion. The ax has fallen, so to speak, and like most ax-jobs, all that’s left is a mutilated, dying corpse, rather than a body mending itself naturally.

The last judgment one should come to is that part of his parishioners are at cross-purposes with God and the church. This decision should be arrived at when there is no other way out, when no other alternative exists. Why? Because it will probably end communication between the two, until one side gives a little. Even if and when this decision is forced upon one, it should be made in the open light of day. A pastor should display trust in the body to make a fair decision as a body and then back it up.

In conclusion, every local parish will choose, either deliberately or by default, whether it will be a power-driven or a purpose-driven model. They will choose to function openly and powerfully with God’s purpose at the center of their structure, or to function more and more purposelessly with decreasing power at the center of their structure. When it comes time to deal with current issues it will be the purpose-driven parish which functions creatively, openly and freely. Reality will call forth people like Peter who sometimes place themselves at cross-purposes with God, and it will take strong words and actions to call them out of the darkness and into the light.

There will also be a James or a John for the body to face, people who need to be lovingly corrected instead of cast as cohorts of Satan. But there will also be women and men with alabaster boxes, doing strange, provocative things, who will need a loving shepherd to say to the indignant ones, “These are at one with the will of God. They are honoring Him whom the Father sent.”

FOOTNOTES

¹David McKenna, "The Legitimate Role of Student Government in the Christian College," *Universitas* III No. 2, (March, 1975), p. 2.

²*Ibid.*, p. 3.

³*Ibid.*, p. 4.