

ROBERT E. WEBBER & RODNEY CLAPP



PEOPLE of the TRUTH

The Power of the Worshiping
Community in the Modern World

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Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 West 8th Avenue, Suite 3
Eugene, Oregon 97401

The People of the Truth
The Power of the Worshipping Community in the Modern World
By Webber, Robert E. and Clapp, Rodney
Copyright©1988 Webber, Robert E. and Clapp, Rodney
ISBN: 1-57910-560-2
Publication Date: February, 2001
Previously published by Harper and Row, 1988.

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PEOPLE OF THE TRUTH

ALSO BY ROBERT E. WEBBER

Worship Is a Verb

Worship Old and New

The Book of Family Prayer

The Church in the World

Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail

Celebrating Our Faith

The Majestic Tapestry

To the communities of St. Barnabas's (Glen Ellyn) and St. Mark's (Geneva), which give us hope that the church—however imperfect—can be what it is supposed to be.

Acknowledgments

For their generosity of time and mind, we owe much to Christopher Lutes and Phillip Ellsworth, who read and critiqued our first draft chapter by chapter; to David Neff and Andrea Lodge, who reviewed the manuscript as a whole; to Jane Marston for her clerical assistance; and to editors Robert D. San Souci and Roy M. Carlisle. Our wives, Joanne and Sandy, with their patience and encouragement, rendered the entire process tolerable and even rewarding.

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PART ONE

THE LOSS OF STORY

[The Church] exists . . . to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to [the world's] own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise. In all its creaturely impotence and human corruption, [the church] is required to do this.

—KARL BARTH, *CHURCH DOGMATICS*, IV/3.2

Introduction

In the past decade or so an extraordinary change has occurred in the interface between the two realms that are arguably America's most powerful and important: religion and politics.

The mainline "liberal" church that enjoyed ascendancy since the New Deal days of Franklin Roosevelt has been unseated. In its place the once despised and maligned fundamentalist church latched onto Ronald Reagan's coattails and created a new religio-political alliance. The arena of religious politicking that was the domain of sophisticated Protestant gentlemen has been commandeered by Bible-wielding evangelists.

We write as persons who have deep sympathies for both camps. One of us grew up fundamentalist; both of us were largely educated and have practiced our professions at institutions central to evangelicalism. As will be clear in the pages that follow, we do not disguise our debt to and continuing appreciation for that tradition. But we also have other affiliations. One of us grew up United Methodist; both of us are now confirmed Episcopalians. Although the mainline churches are currently characterized as "oldline" or "sideline," we find much to champion in the non-evangelical tradition as well.

It might be said that, drawing from evangelical and mainline traditions, we enjoy an embarrassment of riches. But that is not the case in the subject of interest at the moment, religion and politics. Like many Christians of all persuasions, we are dissatisfied (and sometimes mortified) with the religio-political power plays of the religious Right and the religious Left.

This book, then, is about the dilemma so many Christians face: what to do if you are an enthusiast for neither the New Right nor the Old Left but still take seriously the church's social and political responsibility. It is our conviction, and that of a growing number of significant Christian thinkers, that there is an alternative.

Christians need not believe that the root source of their political concern is this or that economic theory or one or another

form of government. The church can assert that God is not a Marxist; he does not call us to the kingdom of socialism. And Christians need not believe that the problems of the world will be solved by rediscovered patriotism, by restored American imperialism, or by some combination of capitalism and democracy. The church can assert that God is not an American; he does not call us to the kingdom of Uncle Sam.

It is high time, in fact, that the church in America makes a priority of disavowing all the cultural, political, and economic ideologies it so eagerly associated with in a quest for illusory power and influence. Rather than attempting to reinstate its old triumphalism, the church should acknowledge that it lives in a largely de-Christianized situation. Then it should exploit that situation by contradicting the expectations of the world and worldly Christians. It should declare that civil religion is now a dead end practically as it always was theologically. And it should recover its *distinct* identity, an identity enacted and rehearsed in worship.

In short, the church should dare to lay down its life; to give up its ill-begotten political leverage; to turn aside from success and stop counting heads (or dollars); to stand at the side of the forgotten poor and oppressed; to be a sign and a witness of humanity's insufficiency and God's all-sufficiency.

Such contradiction is a contradiction bearing promise, because the only hope for this desperately hurting and divided world is not a political or economic program. It is the Christ proclaimed in the gospel and celebrated in worship. And the only people charged with proclaiming this Christ is the church, a people of the truth.

1. The Centrality of the Church

Throughout the history of America, politics and the church have conducted a strange, ambivalent relationship. Sometimes one has shunned the other; sometimes the two have embraced. But divorced or married, there has always been a tension between them. In this century, Christians of differing political persuasions have attempted to resolve the tension with religious-political alliances: the religious Left with the political Left, and—more recently—the religious Right with the political Right.

Although we believe Christians of both Left and Right have sought to act responsibly before God, there is a problem with their alliances. It is a problem of method. Both camps believe they must act politically, using the means of government to fulfill the highest Christian responsibilities of the day. It is as if Christians can do none of their most important business without the intermediary of law and government. And so the most visible pastors of our time, from Jesse Jackson to Jerry Falwell, have thrown their most vital efforts into influencing the political drift of the country. American Christianity seems to be fixated on a single question: “Is the United States what God wants it to be?”

When this becomes the primary question, it is clear there has been a move straight from the individual Christian to the nation America. That move is the theological equivalent of building a wheel without a hub: something essential has been left out of the middle. We want to suggest that the missing essential is the church.

Quite simply, the Christian’s immediate concern should not be with the nation but with the church. The primary Christian question is not “Is the nation what God wants it to be?” but “How is the church? Is it what God wants it to be?”

The church at worship is the radical center from which a Christian political presence in the world radiates. Worship is central because it celebrates and reenacts the Christian story: the story of Christ come to suffer, then defeat, evil. When Christians worship

they are shaped by this story; they become a corporate body formed in the image of Christ, called to heed the truth and live in a divided world as a sign of the future kingdom. But the story Christians reenact in worship is not like any story the world tells or celebrates, so the politics of the worshipping community is not the politics of any national government. Instead, it is the politics of the kingdom of God, eschewing power and legislative clout in favor of influence through service and respectful persuasion.

We are asserting that Christian influence in society should begin with the church, not with government. But to say that the church should concentrate first on itself seems to encourage withdrawal from the life-and-death predicaments confronting the nation and the wider world. It may appear that we are recommending Christians depart from politics and retreat to the cozy and undemanding confines of the family circle. That is emphatically not the case. We are not suggesting that Christians depart from the realm of politics and abandon (or even lessen) social concern. Rather, we are suggesting their politics and social concern are not radical enough. They are not radical enough because American Christians have come to depend on the nation, rather than the church, as their *primary* instrument of social change and communal influence.

Can the church concentrate first (though not solely) on its worship and its mission without withdrawing from wider society, without dwindling into an ineffectual and sectarian body? It can, we believe, because such concentration will yield the church's true identity and vision, what the church really is and how it can see the world for what it really is. By recognizing and reaffirming its own distinctive identity and vision, the church can in fact be a more potent social and political presence than it now is.

The church gains its distinctive vision and identity from its story, and, as we have said, it learns its story in its worship. But American Christians now polarized toward the political Right or Left, and caught up in their respective programs, will not be persuaded to look more deeply to story and worship until they have recognized three preceding realities: first, that the faith or story of the church goes beyond individualism; second, that Christianity is both individual (personal) and social; and third, that worship is ultimately itself a special kind of politics—what we will call “depth politics.”

BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM

A friend who pastored a church in Green Bay, Wisconsin, tells us of an elderly man named Wilson, a gentleman he met while visiting neighborhood homes. The old man informed the young pastor that he had just become a Christian—all by himself. It was done, he boasted, simply by reading the Bible. The implication was that Wilson hardly needed a church. If he could find Jesus without a church, why consider joining one after he had Jesus? This was a point of considerable pride to the old man. All his life he had lived without needing or depending on any other man or woman. Wilson was convinced the best way to do anything was independently, without help from or debt to anyone—anyone on earth, at least.

Ironically, the illusion the gentleman from Green Bay labors under is not at all unusual. In America, it is most widely shared, a “powerful cultural friction that we not only can, but must, make up our deepest beliefs in the isolation of our private selves.”¹ It has unavoidably affected the way American Christians understand their faith.

Most significantly, individualism narrows faith by making the church, the worshiping community, a kind of vestigial organ. Like the appendix, the church is there, but American Christians aren’t quite sure why. If necessary, they can remove it and get along quite well without it. But individualistic Christians go even further and say of the church what they would never say of the appendix: that they may get along *better* without it. The church is actually put at odds with a “personal relationship” to God.

As one Christian told Robert Bellah and his fellow sociologists, Christ will “come into your heart” without any church at all.² This man was not simply making the point that the church does not control Christ (nothing could be truer); he was implicitly criticizing the church, which he considered hypocritical and perhaps stifling. Like Wilson of Green Bay, he neglected the historical fact that knowledge and understanding of Christ was initiated in and passed down by a community, in the fashion of what Bellah calls the “traditional pattern.” Within the traditional pattern there is “a certain priority of the religious community over the individ-

ual. The community exists before the individual is born and will continue after his or her death. The relationship of the individual to God is ultimately personal, but it is mediated by the whole pattern of community life."³

It is the sense and appreciation of the mediating community that seems lost in much American Christianity. American Christians unfortunately believe the best way to live the Christian life is like a deep sea diver, with a private hose linked directly to the source of grace, operating in isolation from other Christians.⁴ Certainly there is a commendable sense in which all Christians can say they have, as one woman told Bellah, "a commitment to God that is beyond church." But the same woman betrays the insidious quality of her individualism when she elaborates and subtly puts God against the church: "I felt my relationship with God was O.K. when I wasn't with the church."⁵

In this all too common view, the church exists exclusively as a personal support—perhaps a place to go when the private diving hose needs mending. The focus is not on seeing the gospel proclaimed, seeing a community of God's people built, seeing the hungry and poor served. Instead, the focus is on a self-fulfillment that supposedly will be attained apart from other people. Thus many American Christians understand their faith as an instrument of self-fulfillment, a way to meet private "needs."

Obviously, such an individualistic, self-centered orientation warps the Christian faith. It remolds it into a form of therapy, absorbing it into the categories of contemporary psychology. In this model, as Bellah aptly observes, "No autonomous standard of good and evil survives outside the needs of individual psyches for growth."⁶

But we are concerned with what the narrowed, individualistic conception does to a Christian view of politics. And there the effects are especially devastating.

Predictably, exaggerated individualism narrows the Christian understanding of politics. Since Americans find it difficult to imagine themselves linked in any but the most rudimentary fashion, politics is understood strictly and only as government. The way to be politically engaged is to create, adjudicate, or administer state and federal laws or directly apply pressure on those who do. For many Americans politics is at most a grubby necessity.

The vast majority of citizens think they have nothing to do with it—after all, they do not spend evenings as power brokers in smoke-filled rooms. But this is an impoverished conception of politics; it makes our politics too small.

A narrow, individualistic understanding of faith and a narrow view of politics make an unhappy combination. Their combination means that Christians concerned for the political and social health of the world bypass the church. They go directly to the only political bodies they can imagine—parties, lobbies, and governmental agencies. And in the process they put the gospel in the service of a particular political agenda. The gospel becomes strangely Republican or Democratic; it begins to sound very much like the capitalist or semisocialist line. It no longer stands in judgment of all ideologies; instead it is adapted to and serves the purposes of a single ideology.

This effect is transparent on both the religious Left and the religious Right. For the religious Left, the locus of God's activity in the world is not the church: it is socio-political liberation wherever it is occurring. For the extreme Left, the divine is active in violent revolutions aimed at freeing peoples from hunger, poverty, and oppression of any kind, from racism to sexism. The church's mission is to support (and even engage in) these revolutions. The less extreme Left reduces the church's mission to government watchdogging. The church makes its own political, social, and economic policy pronouncements and protests when government policy goes astray. Everything of any importance happening in the world happens through the channels of governmental and legislative power.

The consequence of the religious Left's perception of mission is that the church is one more political organ (and perhaps not an especially good one at that). It is divested of its uniqueness in vision and identity. To make governmental politics the whole of the church's mission is to impoverish both politics and faith.

And what about the religious Right? If the religious Left would turn the church into an agent of revolution or a lobby, the religious Right would replace the church with the nation. For it, the locus of God's activity in the world is the nation America. "God is the author of the U.S. Constitution," one politician told a gathering of fundamentalists. Since Christian America must be recov-