

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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ESCHATOLOGIES OF SHIPWRECK

by Gary North

The great chapter in the New Testament which deals with the division of labor within the church is I Corinthians 12. The basic teaching is found in verse 12: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ." The church, the body of Christ, is to perform as a disciplined, integrated body performs. It is not to fight against itself, trip itself, or be marked by jealousy, one member against another.

The twentieth century has brought with it a deplorable application of these words. Instead of viewing the body of Christ as a symbolic body with Christ as the head, modern Christians have adopted the Roman Catholic practice of regarding the priesthood as the head, heart, and hands, with laymen serving as the backs, feet, and legs. In other words, the priests serve as the unquestioned "specialists in religion," while laymen, including elders, serve as the "secular" hewers of wood and drawers of water. The laymen are specialists in the things of "the world," while their priests take care of the spiritual realm.

This unfortunate development began very early in the history of Protestantism, though its full implications have taken several centuries to work out in practice. Protestant sacerdotalism, like Protestant scholasticism, has been with us for a long time. Laymen have automatically assumed that the division of labor spoken of in the New Testament is a division of labor between secular and spiritual pursuits. But this is not what the New Testament teaches. The New Testament's vision of Christ's comprehensive kingdom involves the whole world. Jesus announced: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18). Modern Christians really cannot seem to accept Christ's words. They reinterpret them to say: "All power is given to me in heaven, but I have abdicated as far as the earth is concerned." The priests, as representatives of Christ's spiritual power, which is supposedly the only real power that Christ systematically exercises, are understood to be the central figures in the kingdom. Laymen, who supposedly specialize in earthly affairs, are bearers of an inferior authority (not merely subordinate authority, but by nature inferior).

One of the reasons why Christians have adopted the peculiar view of authority outlined above has to do with the concept of victory. From Augustine to Kuyper, or from Luther to Barth, expositors have too often limited the promise of victory to the institutional church, or even more radically, to the human heart alone. Where a man's heart is, there will be his kingdom. If his hope of victory is limited to his heart, then his concern will be drastically narrowed.

He will worry about his heart, his personal standing before God, his own sanctification, and his relationship to the institutional church. He will be far less concerned about exercising disciplined authority in the so-called secular realm. It is difficult psychologically to wage war on a battlefield which by definition belongs to the enemy. An army which lacks confidence is defeated before it takes the field. This is why God commanded Gideon to announce to the Israelites: "Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from Mount Gilead" (Judges 7:3).

A Theology of Shipwreck

What we have seen, especially since the First World War, is a retreat from victory by Christians, in time and on earth. Precisely at the time when humanism's hopes of a perfectible earth were shattered on the battlefields of Europe, the Christians also gave up hope. The Christians had looked to the victories of secularism in time and on earth, and they had mentally equated these victories with Christ's kingdom promises. When the secular ship went down in a sea of needlessly shed blood, the Christians grabbed the only life preservers they thought were available: pessimistic eschatologies. They took comfort from the fact that the ship had sunk, not because they were safely sailing on a rival ship, but because all optimistic endeavors are supposedly doomed. They had built no ship of their own to compete with the *Titanic* of secularism, so they comforted themselves by clinging to theologies of universal sunken ships.

There are those who parade a theology of ship designing. They say that we ought to conquer the earth by means of Christian institutions. They claim that they have designs ready and waiting — cosmomic designs, certified for export by the Dutch board of trade — but that they know, in advance, that there is no market for such designs, no capital to begin construction, and no hope of seeing them completed. They feel that they have been faithful to the Bible by merely proclaiming the hypothetical possibility of the external kingdom of God on earth. They have not bothered to get down to the blueprint stage, simply because they have not believed that their social and economic designs could ever be implemented. All ships, ultimately, are doomed, say these theologians of shipwreck.

It is surprising, then that the "dominies" in clerical robes are considered to be immune to criticism by laymen within ecclesiastical organizations that are based on a theology of shipwreck? After all, if all secular ships must go down eventually, and all Christian social institutions are equally

doomed, then the only hope is the lifejacket of internal victory. **Spiritual victory** is all that counts, since this alone will float in a sea of social chaos. And, we must always remember, it is only ordained pastors who pass out the lifejackets. They have the keys to the kingdom, meaning the sacraments, preaching, and institutional discipline within the churches. This is the only kingdom there is, if not theologically, then at least practically. The kingdom is finally equated with the institutional church and its operations, despite the fact that Protestant theologians officially reject this medieval vision of the kingdom. Where there is no victory possible, there we find no kingdom vision.

Eschatology and Tyranny

If men have no hope of being able to reform the external world — the world outside the institutional churches — then they are faced with two sources of tyranny. The first is ecclesiastical. The second is political.

Ecclesiastical tyranny stems from the monopoly position which pastors are understood to enjoy within the confines of the institutional churches. If the internal kingdom is the only hiding place for weary, beaten laymen — inevitably defeated in a world devoid of Christ's power — then laymen must accept this resting place on the terms assigned to them by the ordained leadership. A monopoly can extract monopoly returns, after all. The only competition faced by the clerics, given an eschatology of external defeat, is that offered by other clerics in other churches. The world offers no comforts, no hope of successes enjoyed by faithful Christians, no promise of dominion in terms of biblical revelation. The only hope of victory is the victory of the lifejacket. Of course, other churches can also offer lifejackets. This reduces the power of the defenders of Protestant sacerdotalism, but it does not eliminate it. Laymen, in relation to their ecclesiastical superiors, can only play off one against another; they cannot exercise comparable authority in any significant sphere of life officially belonging to them, because their spheres of legitimate authority are battlefields of guaranteed defeat. At best, laymen can be generals of rag-tag armies of incompetents.

An eschatology of shipwreck also leaves men virtually helpless against the unwarranted demands of an expanding civil government. Humanism may be bankrupt, but Christians — who own moral and cultural capital because of their relationship with Christ — are unwilling to make a "run on the banks" of humanism. Therefore, the State expands its naked power, since few voices are raised in **principled protest**. The Christians remain silent, or at least confused in their opposition, precisely because they have been taught that impotence politically and culturally is their assigned task on earth. There are two realms, spiritual and secular, and the secular realm is one of chaos and defeat. Why spend time in principled protest, when the only possible result is defeat? How much capital — energy, time, money, commitment — will men invest in a venture which has attached to it the theological equivalent of a Good Housekeeping seal of disapproval?

So what we find in the twentieth century is a twofold expansion of power, first by the defenders of Protestant sacerdotalism, and second by the secular State. The State needs pastors who preach a theology of defeat. It keeps the laymen quiet, in an era in which Christian laymen are the most significant potential threat to the unwarranted expansion of State power.

Christian Schools

The independent Christian school movement is today probably the most important source of opposition to both ecclesiastical and civil tyrannies. A successful Christian school trains up principled, competent young people who are far better prepared to exercise dominion than the products of either traditional parochial schools or the secular government schools. The independent school has proven that laymen can accomplish great things without State money and probably with only minimal support financially from the churches. In fact, one reason why Christian schools should be independent from the churches is to thwart the theologies of Protestant sacerdotalism, which affirm the unchallenged spiritual authority of the institutional church. If the Christian school is legally and institutionally separate from the institutional church, then the defenders of Protestant sacerdotalism face a successful Christian endeavor which they have not created or operated. This is why it is far more preferable to separate the school from the institutional church. Parents, as responsible laymen, should finance the school, either through full-cost tuitions, or through direct donations (less preferable). To be a responsible parent is the starting point of Christian reconstruction. (See my essay, "Family Authority vs. Protestant Sacerdotalism," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* [Winter, 1977-78], P.O. Box 158, Vallecito, CA 95251: \$4.00)

A Christian school is begun with a fundamental premise, namely, that explicitly Christian education is superior to secular education. Once this premise is accepted, an intellectual revolution becomes possible. Of course, if the school is begun primarily as a hot-house refuge from secularism — or as a hot-house refuge from the corruptions of a national or racial heritage other than one's own — then this revolution of optimism will be thwarted. If the Christian school is seen as a mere resting place from the chaos of the world, or as an extension of the institutional church (especially if the church is seen primarily as a remnant enclave of some European cultural and national heritage), then a great opportunity will be lost, at least for this century. Let us begin to construct institutions of implicit victory; the explicit victory will take care of itself in God's own time. An independent Christian school is a good place to begin. (See Robert L. Thoburn's book, *How to Establish and Operate a Successful Christian School*, \$125.00, available from Fairfax Christian Book Store, 11121 Pope's Head Rd., Fairfax, VA 22030).

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