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THE CHURCH IS LIKE A PARADE

Leonard R. Payton

All sorts of people have tried their hands at metaphors for the church. The Salvation Army is a vestigial, living metaphor from the nineteenth century. By contrast, it seems most fashionable at present to juxtapose the church with business, management, and marketing models. And while downsizing, which is so popular in business, doesn't fit comfortably into church parlance, certainly there is great concern for upsizing and for church growth whereby one is able to point to a tangible increase in numbers.

All extra biblical metaphors for the church of necessity fall short of the reality, and mine will, no doubt, be inadequate too. I offer it, however, in the hope that it will highlight facets of the church that are frequently overlooked or drowned out in our time.

The church is like a parade. Adam and Eve are at the head of the column, and the last elect infant to be born is at the tail. In between are all the saints of history. The church has one chant as she marches that extends invariant from one end of history to the other. It's the gospel: Christ died for sinners; He was buried; He rose on the third day; He was seen; we therefore have a hope of the forgiveness of sins and a bodily resurrection. This parade and its chant are inextricable from one another, and they are inexorable.

The parade has a specific route. Its beginning is the mysterious and kind intentions of God before the foundation of the cosmos. Its end is the Marriage Feast of the

Lamb. A time comes for each marcher as he rounds that last bend that God welcomes him to that feast.

Before that last bend, however, there is a reviewing stand occupied by one man. He is not God. He is merely an impersonal viewer. We will call him "Mr. Now," the present.

Mr. Now looks as far as he can see in one direction and finds frail, grizzled great-grandparents about to go around that last bend. But Mr. Now is not permitted to see the marvels they are about to become. He looks then in the other direction and sees infants just being born.

On first blush, Mr. Now is looking at about four generations. Yet, though he is not permitted to look around the last bend, he is very perceptive. After all, he has been watching this parade for a long time. When he looks at the great-grandparents, he sees the parents, grandparents and great-grandparents who formed them. And when he looks at the infants, he sees the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in their loins whom they will form. So at any one point in time, Mr. Now is looking at a contemporary church that encompasses about ten generations, a slice of two- to four hundred years.

Like any parade, there are bystanders watching as it passes, and these bystanders respond variously. Some are just curious and watch for a while until they are bored and wander away.

Some have pity on the marchers. "Aren't you tired, hungry and bored? Wouldn't you like to come over here and have a hot dog?" They tug at the marchers, thinking they are rescuing them from all this silliness.

Still others are intrigued by the parade and talk to the marchers. "You know, this is really cool what you are doing; I would join if you would make that chant a little more interesting; you know, put in some variety."

Then there are the watchers who become a bit surly.

"Who do these people think they are anyway with their judgmental 'Christ died for sinners?'" They jeer. They pester the marchers with projectiles of all sorts. Once in a while, one of these objectionable bystanders sticks a foot out to trip a nerdy marcher on the fringe. In all, it can be ugly.

There is one thing that divides the marchers from the bystanders, and it is not that some are marching while others are standing on the edge. No. What differentiates these two groups is that the marchers can see around the corner at the end of the parade route. It is a special faculty given only to those in the parade.



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Sometimes the marchers are chanting so loudly and overwhelmingly that bystanders are spontaneously compelled to join the parade. Certainly this could be seen during the Diocletian persecution at the end of the third century, when it was said that for every Christian the government

executed, five more sprang up in his place.

At other times, the marchers chant without the full conviction of heart, soul, mind, and strength. They are distracted by the bystanders. Some marchers think how nice it would be just for a moment to step out of the parade to get a hot dog. Others try to make the chant more cool. Some appeal loudly to the police about the hazing bystanders, trying to shape and implement laws that will make marching safe. At such times, the parade can almost fall into disarray—almost, but not quite. For Christ promised that He (and He alone) would build His church, and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it. Regrettably, our time is like the near disarray of the parade.

The church takes one step in the march once every seven days with the lackluster means of Word and sacrament. It's right in there with glacial movement for entertainment value. Furthermore, puking and mewling infants and wizened octogenarians are taking the step at the same time. God has chosen the weak and foolish things of the world to confound the wise, the cool, and the mighty. We will not be stopped, not because we have our program together, but because God has planned and is executing His design in the church.

Author

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