

Timothy W. Whitaker

The Church's Task of MORAL FORMATION

The youth of the congregation wanted to study the teaching of religions other than Christianity and the denomination of The United Methodist Church. As their pastor, I agreed to develop a plan to learn about other Christian communions and non-Christian religions. For the session on Judaism I invited a Jewish woman to talk about her faith. She was the obvious choice as a speaker because she was married to a member of the congregation, and she regularly attended services of worship.

During her presentation she said, "Judaism is based upon the Torah. The Torah is the law of God. We Jews are interested in the moral formation of people by teaching them how to live their lives in accordance with God's law." Then she added this comparison between Judaism and Christianity, "The emphasis in Christianity is upon God's forgiveness, but we Jews are interested in how God wants us to be good people by obeying God's law."

At first I was offended by her portrayal of Christianity as a religion that lacked the mature, serious commitment to moral formation that is a central purpose of Judaism. Yet I knew that she was in a position to make a comparison between Judaism and Christianity because she was an observant Jew who attended services of worship in a United Methodist church every Sunday. The message she overheard in The United Methodist Church is that Christianity is

a religion that is so preoccupied with the invitation to people to receive divine forgiveness that it is oblivious to the need to provide moral formation for its people. After I got over feeling offended by her remarks, I began to reflect upon what we are doing in the church. I could see how someone from the outside could get the impression that we are not seriously interested in a moral formation. We proclaim a message of God's love. We find meaning in the

stories of the Bible. We enjoy a mutually supportive community. We seek to minister to people less fortunate than ourselves. Yet where is the intentional agenda of moral formation in our church? The church is successful in helping people to feel good, but is it

effective in enabling people to be good? I began to understand how an observant Jew who is committed to the Torah would perceive Christianity as we practice it as curiously unengaged in the task of the moral formation of people.

One of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century was Walter Kaufman. Kaufman wrote the provocative *The Faith of a Heretic*. It is a reasoned apology for atheism and a principled attack upon Christianity. One of his lines of attack is that the organized churches fail to instruct people in "a high morality." Kaufman seemed to make the same charge against Christianity that was made by my Jewish friend. He wrote, "The attitude of the traditional

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Christian denominations toward morality is much more equivocal than that of Jews and liberals, whether they are secularists or not. The glad tidings of Christianity are not that you must sin no more: forbidding sin is not glad tidings. The glad tidings are that, though you sin, there is forgiveness. Even if your sin is grievous, you can confess it and be forgiven if you are sincerely sorry.”¹

He acknowledges that the churches teach people a conventional morality widely embraced by the surrounding culture, but he faults them for failing to be concerned about instructing people in what he calls “a high morality.”

We might want to mount a defense against this criticism of Christianity, but

it would be wiser for us to engage in some self-examination in light of these perceptions of the church. We should admit there is truth in the perception of some outside the church that we who are Christians often do not take seriously the task of moral formation of people.

We could identify some reasons why the church neglects the task of moral formation. One reason is that we have not yet broken the habits developed during the previous cultural establishment of Christianity called Christendom. The cultural establishment of the church conditioned it to assume that the morality of the culture was a “Christian” morality and blinded it to its own distinctive high morality as expressed in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Considering itself the religion of the culture, the church assumed that its special province was to cultivate people’s spiritual lives, or “taste for the Infinite,” as it was expressed by Friedrich Schleiermacher.² The cultural disestablishment of Christianity should cause the church to realize that if its members are going to receive moral formation, then the church will have to provide it, and the moral formation it should provide is not instruction in conventional morality but in the distinctive moral practices that proceed from faith in the Triune God.

Another reason why the church neglects the task of moral formation is because of the tendency toward antinomianism in much of the church’s interpretation of the Christian faith. Antinomianism is proclaiming the free grace of God in Jesus Christ in a way that says or implies that God’s grace

makes void the moral law of God. Evidence of antinomian tendencies in the church would be the popularity in the late twentieth century of Paul Tillich’s sermon, “You Are Accepted.”³ Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches write that the substitution of “acceptance” for “forgiveness” in Christian rhetoric obscures how forgive-

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ness is “truthful in a way that mere acceptance without forgiveness is not,” namely that forgiveness communicates the reality that we are sinners who have trespassed against the moral law of God.⁴

Often the church does not intend to be antinomian in its presentation of the Christian faith, but it still fails to fulfill its task of moral formation. The church may be negligent only in the sense that it is not articulating a compelling vision of the Christian life in concrete terms. As John B. Cobb Jr. observed, “The gospel is now presented chiefly in psychological terms, vaguely related to common-sense morality. Since it responds to no urgent need, it can be quietly believed and accepted with little effect.”⁵

If there is one Christian communion that ought to understand the church’s task of moral formation it is The United Methodist Church. Central to John Wesley’s theology was the integration of law and gospel. Wesley taught that the law of God has a role to play in leading us to an awareness of our need of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Moreover, once we have been justified, forgiven, and born anew by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the law still has a role to play of giving us direction about how to live and showing us how much more we need to rely upon grace to grow in our ability to do God’s will. It is notable that Wesley considered the Sermon on the Mount rather than the Ten Commandments as the normative expression of the divine law. The importance of the integration of law and gospel in Wesley’s theology is emphasized

by his inclusion of three sermons on the law in his *Standard Sermons*. A church informed by the Wesleyan interpretation of grace will take seriously the task of moral formation.

The primary model for this task is the General Rules required of members of the Methodist Societies. (See p. 29.) The General Rules represent a remarkable endeavor to define—without legalism—a vision of what a genuine Christian life looks like as specifically and concretely as possible. If we could re-write the General Rules for our present time, then what should we say?

Another important resource in the Methodist heritage is the 1908 Social Creed of The Methodist Episcopal Church. This

document articulated a vision of social and economic justice to govern the practice and public witness of Christians during the historical period in which it was written.

In our current era characterized by the violence of war and abortion, consumerism and economic exploitation, sexual abuse and permissiveness, the frailty of families and friendships, and incivility and hate speech, the church has a responsibility and an opportunity to form Christian character and practices that save human lives from destruction and offer an alternative vision of what the world can become. □

1. Walter Kaufman, *The Faith of a Heretic* (Anchor Books, 1963), 269.
2. Friedrich Schleiermacher, “The Nature of Religion,” in *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 39.
3. Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 153-163.
4. Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 121.
5. John B. Cobb Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 124.



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