

Whatever Happened to Humility?

Thoughts on the sin of triumphalism



I'M
HUMBLED
AND
PROUD
OF IT

In many churches it is now *de rigueur* to clap for the performers of the "special music," and sometimes even for the preacher.

Of course this may be nothing more than a peculiar way of saying "Amen." I cannot help wondering, though, if we shall clap for Michael the archangel when we stand before the throne of God. Have evangelicals been so influenced by the entertainment industry (Does the *Applause* sign on the Johnny Carson show work any differently from the *Applause* sign on the PTL Club?) that we unwittingly consider worship services to provide opportunities for "performers" to become "stars"?

(Perhaps we are returning to an outlook common throughout the Graeco-Roman world in the time of Paul. Philostratus tells us that "a sophist is put out in an extempore speech by a serious-looking audience and tardy praise and no clapping." Public humility was often perceived as a sign of inferior breeding, meekness as weakness. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us, "In the scorn of fame was implied the scorn of virtue.")

Today's Christian bookstores display more than a few titles such as *How to Write Your Own Ticket with God*. We seem

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to be a generation that hungers for lordship in the intellectual arena but knows little of a crucified mind. Spiritual hucksters promise the power of Christ's resurrection, but, unlike Paul, fail to mention the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. It is easy to forget that the phrase "more than conquerors" is applied not to believers who are staggeringly successful, healthy, wealthy, and popular, but to believers who are confronting trouble, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, martyrdom—men and women who "conquer" not by avoiding these things but by enduring them courageously, their faith and joy testifying that they are followers of the Christ whose love and power now preserves them.

The evangelical resurgence of the past three decades has nurtured weaknesses as well as strengths. Some of these weaknesses are so disturbing it is easy to think, in more cynical moments, that the movement is a vast shell without much substance. That judgment is much too harsh; but it may become a prophecy if we do not recognize and correct some of the evils we have spawned. One of the worst of these is triumphalism.

Triumphalism is present when the "victorious Christian life" has obviously become a subterfuge for looking out for number one. Triumphalism amplifies verses about blessing and victory, and ignores the many passages calling for brokenness and repentance.

The power that is ours for the asking enables us to be conformed to Christ, and to experience the limitless dimensions of the love of God. It does not promote ecclesiastical one-upmanship or transform us all into spiritual Luke Skywalkers.

All the danger signals of triumphalism come to a head when we are advised to make self-esteem the touchstone of all theological validity. Like most errors, this one has just enough truth that it cannot be summarily dismissed without reflection. Human beings, after all, cannot function maturely unless they can assert themselves and

recognize their immense worth as creatures made in the image of God. But Robert Schuller and his school attack the problem without maintaining other truths. Sin is reduced to lack of self-esteem. The solution to such a sin problem is self-love. But the Bible treats sin first and foremost as an offense against God, the essence of which is man's declaration of independence—a form of acute self-love. The cross is the solution to this problem, if God is to preserve his justice while justifying rebellious people. When evangelism is so narrowly focused on meeting human needs and promising unbroken success and health and prosperity that it is prepared to sacrifice the structure of elementary biblical Christianity, a price too high has been paid.

The Corinthians, arguably, were the worst triumphalists in the early church. With their mistaken notion that the full eschatological blessings of Christ were already theirs, they strutted like kings while Paul reminded them that the apostles remained the scum of the earth. Nurtured by a pagan mindset, they expected an apostle to parade his credentials, command fat fees, declaim with showy oratory, reveal details of spiritual visions. But Paul would not oblige. His own credibility endangered, and with it the gospel, he finally embarks on a parody of the bragsheets commonly written by great men in the ancient world. Instead of telling about the churches he has planted, the sermons he has preached, the successes he has enjoyed and the books he has written, he lists the number of times he has been flogged, imprisoned, shipwrecked, stoned. While others brag of their visions, Paul recounts the greatest vision he ever received with such extreme reluctance that he puts himself in the third person; but he happily reverts to the "I" and "me" when he tells about the thorn in the flesh given to keep him from becoming conceited.

Why? Because Paul learned that God's power is made perfect in weakness. For God's empowering grace to be manifest, triumphalism must die. Ω