

No Space for the Soul (12/29/97)

Billy Graham is known for remarking that our society allows no space for the soul. Which is true, but is it important?

Jerry Falwell once remarked to the Disney people – while they were pretending to do news one Sunday morning – that, “Money is not the cure. More taxes is not the cure. More welfare is not the answer. We’ve got to preach Biblical morality.”

Falwell was responding to something Mario Cuomo said about government moving away from Judeo-Christian principles. Cuomo was lamenting the fact that we seem to have no sense of brotherhood or sisterhood. This year our society turned a half a million children off welfare to live in destitution and poverty, while the wealthiest 1% lives in ever greater opulence.

Falwell is an evil man who preaches accommodation to the injustice around us. This is not new. But it is interesting that Falwell and Graham are both responding to a deepening crisis in American society. People are noticing the decay around them and some who are desperate or uneducated enough fall into the trap set by Falwell and his ilk.

But then there is Graham. Billy Graham is not a radical, but he does offer significantly more than Falwell, because he is at least willing to pretend that he can think – where Falwell is content to flail around spewing ignorance and fear. Graham at least asks the question, why do we have a crisis of faith in America? And he quite astutely recognizes that most people are not allowed any space in their lives to really live. There is no space in the lives of the American people for faith, for brotherhood, for being human.

More and more we are being squeezed into these little plastic molds in which we live and run around trying to meet the demands of modern life, only then to realize that we work, we survive, but we do not live. And why? Because we are not allowed to live, we are denied the space to live.

Graham is honest enough to acknowledge this – Falwell just blames the victims. But then acknowledging that we are not allowed space for the soul begs the question, why is this so?

You don’t need anyone to tell you. If you work for a living, it is enough to just reflect on the life you lead and that those around you lead. But it is, tragically, a radical act to even ask the question. That is how little space there is left for the soul in America today.

The Pew Research Center released a study late in 1997 that concluded that more and more Americans report never doubting the existence of a god, believing that miracles come from this god, and believing that prayer is an important daily activity. Which is interesting, in this context of a crisis of faith in America.

Falwell should be wetting himself with excitement over news like this. But then, I have fallen into the trap of thinking that there is some connection between what Falwell thinks and what he says. No one could really be as perverse and savagely ignorant as Falwell claims to be.

The Pew people didn’t actually define any of the terms used in their study so we cannot even guess what their statistics mean. But we can say that more Americans report a faith using terms that people like Falwell claim to identify with. So what kind of a fool would believe Falwell when he says that we need only to preach Biblical morality?

On the show from which I have taken most of these remarks, the Disney employee in charge, one Laura Schlessinger, said that the problem is that our clergy do not lead. They act more like camp counselors than religious leaders, she said.

Which is true. The most inspiring of American clergy, a man named Father James Carney was killed in Honduras by the CIA and Honduran Special Forces 15 years ago. According to defectors from the unit which dropped Carney out of a helicopter over the Honduran jungle a thousand feet up, Carney spread his arms in the shape of a cross as he fell, and said, "Father, forgive them...."

For he will deliver the needy when he cries for help, the afflicted also, and him who has no helper. He will have compassion on the poor and needy and the lives of the needy he will save. He will rescue their life from oppression and violence, and their blood will be precious in his sight. (Psalm 72:12-14)

Carney had gone to Honduras from Wisconsin and eventually took the name Padre Guadalupe. He said, "To be a Christian is to be a revolutionary. If you are not a revolutionary, you are not a Christian." And he figured that if those doing evil -- the Honduran Army -- had chaplains then those on the side of Christ, on the side of righteousness and justice should have a chaplain too. So he joined the rebels in jungle, and -- like Christ -- it was while ministering to the poor and oppressed that he was captured and then killed.

I don't think this is what Schlessinger had in mind when she said that American clergy no longer lead. Nor is this the Biblical morality Falwell has in mind. Those, like Falwell, doing evil should take heed for the day of redemption is coming. I suspect that the miracle people report believing in will have something to do with someone like Padre Guadalupe.

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