

Session to Session

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The Christian Boycott?

by Kenneth A. Myers

The release of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the response it has generated provide an opportunity to reflect on questions about the place of Christians in American society, about the Church and religious movements, and about the necessity of understanding culture before attempting to influence it.

The dominant response to *The Last Temptation of Christ* can be characterized in terms of economic coercion. From Bill Bright's efforts to buy the film from MCA/Universal in order to destroy it, to the call to boycott all MCA-owned businesses, the principal intent of the protesters is to prevent the film from being seen. As Focus on the Family reported, a number of Christian leaders "are mounting a nationwide effort involving hundreds of Christian groups and costing millions of dollars to mobilize national pressure to stop the release of the film. They don't want impressionable viewers to receive a twisted view of Christ that will keep them from faith in the historic Jesus."

In a September letter to his constituency, James Dobson wrote that if the film's distribution could not be stopped, its distributors should be punished. "We must send this unmistakable message to the producers and directors at Universal: 'If you continue to assault the Christian system of beliefs and undermine the morality of our children, it will cost you dearly at the box office. It will decrease the profits of every business you own for years to come.' There's nothing unchristian about that position in a free enterprise system."

I have not seen *The Last Temptation*, and have no intention of debating here its merits or demerits, or in arguing about the extent of its blasphemy and sacrilege. There are those who argue that the charge of blasphemy involves a misreading of the film's structure (see for example Harry M. Cheney in *Eternity*, October 1988). On the other hand, there are those who argue that no matter how you exegete the film, it is a violation of the second commandment's prohibition of idolatry through the making of graven images.

For the sake of argument, I will accept the charge that *The Last Temptation* is guilty of distorting the record of the gospels and of blasphemy. Having been granted this premise, the protestors of the film nonetheless must consider seriously the charge that they unwittingly attracted more atten-

tion to the film than it could have hoped to garner on its own, because of the nature and style of their protest. If it is true that consequences matter at least as much as intentions, and if the goal was to minimize the spiritual damage done by this film, its militant critics must be willing to entertain the question of whether they did more harm than good, whether more people saw the film than would have if a large public protest had not been staged.

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Where Now the Unity of Christ's Universal Body?

by Thomas E. Tyson

Every Christian traveler knows the wonderful oneness of Christ's body, the Church. Better than all the dazzling sights, sounds, and tastes is getting to know a few Christians in another country. Their joy in adversity inspires you. Their zeal for getting out the gospel motivates you. Their generous hospitality warms you.

For all these reasons, this year's developments in the formal fellowship of reformed churches creates a deep-down sadness. Our soul-brothers have departed from us, and we have had to separate from them. In June of 1988, the reformed churches of the world met together in Harare, Zimbabwe. But before the meeting was over, the churches parted in different directions.

Attending such a meeting impresses you with the unity and the diversity of the body of Christ. You find different kinds of dress, different skin color, differences of language, and much more. But historically, the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) has provided an opportunity for all these different believers to enjoy what they had in common: a commitment to Christ, his Word, and the reformed faith.

I've always known there were Christians the world over. But in Harare, it struck me with unusual force: these dear saints of God who live in grass houses believe as I do in divine election! Maybe saying that kind of thing betrays a provincialism in me that is unworthy and culpable. If so, I confess it. But I'm glad to have my sights enlarged and my heart expanded so I can embrace brothers and sisters in the reformed faith who represent cultures very different from mine.

The reformed churches of Zimbabwe, for example, are two-and-a-half times as large as my denomination, the

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Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Africa seems definitely to be the upcoming continent for the reformed faith. There were delegates from most of the southern and mid-African countries. The churches they represent are vital and growing, giving clear testimony to the working of the Holy Spirit in the land of David Livingstone, that pioneer presbyterian!

With all that good news, it's saddening to turn to the chief burden of this report. In a word, the RES is gone! Our church's delegation, along with several others, found it necessary to withdraw its membership in the course of the proceedings.

The crucial vote came during an evening service. The motion had to do with one group of churches that allows practicing homosexuals to have membership in their churches, to partake of the Lord's supper, and even to hold church office. In their justification of this stand, they have written in effect, "We know better than Paul." In their opinion, the poor Apostle apparently didn't realize that homosexuality is an alternate and biblically acceptable life-style. They have concluded that God has created some people that way. They understand Paul to be railing against the homosexual *promiscuity* within Roman culture. They propose that the Bible does not speak against a life-long physical relationship of "love" between persons of the same sex. So their argument goes.

How could it be that a reformed church, the church that produced Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands, has slipped so far so fast? How could they be taken up in the spirit of the day so easily?

Beneath their ethical error lies a faulty view of Scripture. In their pronouncements, they defend a "relational" theology which says that we can never "get behind" the statements of Scriptures to discover universally binding principles. All we have in the Bible is the "song" of the church of that day. It testifies to us about "something" that happened, but we cannot uncover what "really" happened. We cannot even know if the tomb was empty. All we have is the early church's "song" of an empty tomb.

The vote was 34 to 22 in favor of allowing the Dutch denomination holding these views to remain uninhibited in the RES for a minimum of eight more years. At that point, our delegation had to declare its testimony: "Until yesterday, we could not *leave* the RES because of conscience; today, we cannot *remain* because of conscience."

Three other denominations either resigned on the spot with us, or informed the group that their membership is suspended pending a final determination by their denomination's highest court. Three other churches which had not given their delegates authority to withdraw quite probably will reconsider their membership.

The exercise of discipline is a vital mark of the true Church. The grievous mistake of the RES has been to forget this foundational principle. The result is that, to date, nine or ten churches have found it necessary to withdraw

from the fellowship. The Apostle Paul said: "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are" (I Cor. 5:6, 7).

The Reformed Ecumenical Synod began over 40 years ago as an alternative to the World Council of Churches. Its goal was to provide a forum for fellowship among reformed and presbyterian denominations the world over who were determined to stick to the Bible. But where now is the unity of Christ's universal body to be seen by the world? A new way for expressing our oneness in Him must be found.

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The Hollywood sages know that there is no such thing as bad publicity, that being banned in Boston or anywhere else is much more likely to increase box office revenue than reduce it, and that the worst thing that can happen to a movie is to be ignored. Perhaps the film's enemies should have hired a Hollywood publicist and sought some worldly wisdom before staging their protests.

One must also ask what long-range effects the anti-*Temptation* movement will have on subsequent efforts at presenting the gospel, and on the perceptions of Jesus Christ and his Church. If the goal is to remove stumbling blocks from acceptance of the gospel, one must ask whether the protests themselves haven't produced a significant and unnecessary obstacle for many people.

That outcome might have been avoided if the organizers of the protest had thought more clearly about two very different ways of understanding their objective: proclamation and pressure. If the goal is to prevent the film from being a means of deception, one means to this end might be to stress proclamation of the truth, publicly condemning it as false and blasphemous, while giving great care to see that orthodox teaching about the person and work of Christ was abundantly available to the public, through churches, the mass media, public meetings, and other forums.

Accompanied by prayer, this approach is traditional, ecclesiastical, and spiritual. It is essentially a form of the proclamation of the Word of God, which is the Church's abiding, prophetic task. In pursuing this task, the Church can expect rejection and even persecution, as Jesus promised.

Such an approach may have been taken by some Christians, but I know of none. I seriously doubt that many Christians agitated about the film gave greater attention to the history of the Church's effort to formulate the biblical doctrine of the person of Christ. How many adult Sunday School classes examined the debates that culminated in the

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definition of the council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, or Anselm's argument about the God-man Jesus? I have little confidence that many Christians have taken the challenge this film represents seriously enough to gird up their intellectual loins to be able to explain to their neighbors or colleagues the significance of Jesus' humanity or the reality of his temptation and his sinlessness.

Most of the leaders of the protest are publicly identified with parachurch organizations (though one assumes they are also church members), a fact that reflects one of the greatest weaknesses of modern Evangelicalism: that it is dominated by parachurch organizations. One cannot properly speak of "the Evangelical church." It is a movement, and it tends to adopt the sort of strategies that all movements prefer, adding prayer at the top of the list to ensure a Christian identity. But rarely is it asked if there might be some intrinsic conflict between strategies preferred by the Church and those preferred by other associations.

When Christians band together to try to boycott a film or

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prevent its release, they are acting as, and will only be perceived as, members of one of many special interest groups in the political order. Such an action is civic and commercial rather than spiritual, though it may be motivated by spiritual considerations. The means it employs, press releases, demonstrations, and boycotts, are political and economic. While such actions may well be permissible, given the dynamics of our culture, they may not be beneficial, as matters spiritual and transcendent are all too easily obscured by a public relations firefight.

Many commentators have noted the hypocrisy of Hollywood and its allies in championing the cause of a film so offensive to Christians, when it would not tolerate a comparable assault on the sensibilities of blacks, Jews, homosexuals, or other American "communities." Why can't Christians be accorded the same "sensitivity" the media and other cultural elites extend to various minority groups? This argument may be sound, but it is also unwise. For by defining Christians merely as an interest group, one thereby legitimizes opposition to Christianity by other interest

groups. The truth of the gospel, including the truth about who Jesus was, is thus perceived as partisan rather than transcendent and universal. One also gives encouragement to those on the Left who maintain that religious matters are mere expressions of political and economic concerns.

Frustrated with MCA/Universal's "callous indifference to the Christian faith," the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) has now escalated the conflict by issuing a call to their constituency to boycott the purchase of video-cassettes of another MCA/Universal release, the popular *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*.

NAE's executive director, Billy Melvin, explained the strategy: "If we can significantly impact the profits that MCA/Universal expects from the *E.T.* video, that should get the film industry's attention. We believe MCA/Universal should be held accountable for their intolerance and insensitivity. It's altogether appropriate for evangelicals to express their displeasure by refusing to purchase MCA/Universal products. . . . We are acting in the spirit of the First Amendment."

In adopting this strategy, the more significant objective of condemning blasphemy is effectively preempted. Christians ought to denounce blasphemy not because it offends them, but because it offends God. By defining the issue in terms of intolerance and insensitivity, especially by appealing to "the spirit of the First Amendment" rather than the spirit of the first and second commandments, the NAE has made this film a matter of competing civil rights: the NAE has the right to protest, but Martin Scorsese has the right to make the film. By choosing the strategy of commercial coercion, the NAE puts its position on equal footing with the heresy it detests.

This strategy fits the requirements of civility in the American polity, and it is entirely appropriate given the necessary theological limitations of the NAE. The NAE is not a church. It does not administer sacraments. It does not exercise ecclesiastical discipline. It does not ordain elders and deacons. And it does not proclaim the Word of God with the authority that has been granted the Church of the apostles and prophets. The NAE, like many other parachurch groups, serves the legitimate but limited end of representing the interests of its constituents in the civic realm. When its officers and representatives speak, they do not speak with the authority that Christ has given the Church, but as individual Christians and as representatives of an association. So it is fitting that the NAE adopt a strategy that emphasizes a limited, civic goal: that of assuring political and social room for its constituency.

But in this case we should see how the civic goal of minimizing offense to a sector of the population overshadows the spiritual goal of prophetically proclaiming the truth regardless of the consequences.

If you live by the boycott, you may die by the boycott. If you present yourself merely as one of many patches in the pluralist American crazy quilt, you must behave with the

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same decorum you ask of others. If you try to use coercive economic means to prevent a false Messiah from being presented in 70 millimeter Dolby stereo, then you should not expect the freedom to present the true Messiah, if that presentation is as offensive to some fellow citizens as Scorsese's presentation is to you.

As compelling as the case might be for Christians to adopt the tactics of Cesar Chavez, it seems that there are great risks in encouraging the perception that they are just another

special interest group. While respecting the NAE's intentions, threatening to boycott *E.T.* is liable to distract attention from the prophetic, authoritative proclamation of truth and repudiation of error that is the first duty of the Church of Jesus Christ.

If the tactics of the parachurch dominate cultural challenges, protest and politicking will loom larger in the public mind than the proclamation of the Church. If public protest gives the impression that Christians are principally concerned about power and about their own political standing, it will become that much more difficult to take every thought captive to Jesus Christ.

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