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Pastoral Ministries

Jesus Cleanses the Temple: An Exposition of Matthew 21:12–17

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INTRODUCTION

This event of Jesus cleansing the temple is one of the few incidents in Jesus' life which is reported by all the four evangelists ([Mark 11:15–17](#), [Luke 19:45–46](#), and [John 2:13–22](#)). But while John reports it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the other evangelists report it at the end. Possibly there was more than one cleansing. Clearly the Matthean account took place after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

The fact which is significant for our meditation on this passage is that soon after his triumphal entry into the city, 'Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all those who were buying and selling there, he overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves' ([Matthew 21:12](#)). Mark adds, 'Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything but since it was already late he went out to Bethany with the twelve' ([Mark 11:11](#)). This clearly shows that the cleansing was not an on-the-spot decision of Jesus; rather it was a deliberately thought-through plan.

THE TEMPLE: SIGNIFICANT IN JESUS' MINISTRY

What did Jesus actually do in this temple cleansing? Often this passage is so expounded as to mean that Jesus was a social revolutionary. It is said that he came to liberate the oppressed from their oppressors in the temple and bring economic justice to the poor Jews. He was therefore against the establishment—the temple authorities. On the basis of such an interpretation many Christians demand the participation of the Church in the socio-economical revolutions of our time. But there are several exegetical considerations which are against such an interpretation.

If Jesus' intention was to liberate the poor Jews from their exploiters, he should have taken action against the oppressors of the time—namely, [p. 278](#) the chief priests and the scribes, but in the passage we see that he is driving out the *oppressed*. Of special significance is the fact that Jesus drove out the sellers of the doves. According to Moses' law, doves were the sacrificial animals of the poorest of the Jews, e.g., the family of Jesus offered doves as a sacrifice at his birth. As Matthew records, here Jesus is driving out both the sellers and the buyers of the doves—the poor people. Thus, in the passage there is no indication that Jesus sided with the poorest.

Neither was he against the oppressors, the established religious structures, the priests, the Pharisees, the chief priests, the scribes and the like. Besides the buyers and the sellers of the sacrifice animals, there were also other groups in the temple—the teachers and the pupils, the priests, the other rich worshippers, women and children,

Gentiles and so on. Jesus drives out none of them. He is against only one group, namely, those who had reduced religion to business. In fact in the passage we read that he came not to attack religion but to establish it. In verse [13](#), Jesus himself says, 'It is written, my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.' For some the temple was the place of sacrifices, for others it was a business centre, for still others like the Zealots it was their meeting place. The Zealots were also called robbers at that time. What Jesus is saying here is: The temple is primarily not a place of sacrifice or business or a meeting place but rather it is a place to meet God; it is a house of prayer. Far from destroying religion Jesus is establishing it. And this is the first thing Jesus does after entering Jerusalem. He seeks the temple; he goes to it and cleanses it, even though he knew very well that his enemies would be there. He had already foretold that chief priests and scribes would arrest and kill him. These were already his enemies; therefore Jesus is cleansing the temple at great risk.

A third reason why this passage does not make Jesus a social revolutionary is this: Jesus did not use violence here (in the sense of harming life). All revolutions are drastic and radical changes in society and they inevitably disrupt society and so violence is present in one way or the other in all revolutions. Otherwise, they would not be revolutions, but merely evolutions.

John's gospel records, 'He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.' To those who sold doves he said 'Get these out of here! How dare you turn my father's house into a market?' ([John 2:15, 16](#)). The whip of cords Jesus made was far different from the cruel Roman whip, with leather straps and lead balls and hooks to tear the flesh; and even this whip of cords he [p. 279](#) does not use on people but only on sheep and cattle. He is even gentler to the birds. He does not overturn their cages but tells those who sold doves, 'Get these out of here.'

What is more, to label Jesus a violent person on the basis of one single misinterpreted passage in the face of all his life and teaching which prove otherwise is a gross error. How can we forget his teaching, 'If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also' ([Matt. 5:39](#))? How can we forget his words to Peter, 'Put your sword back in its place' ([Matt. 26:25](#))? Beyond all this how can one forget his suffering and death on the cross? It is far from the facts to make Jesus out to be a violent person or a social revolutionary.

As a matter of fact, our passage clearly shows that Jesus was not a social revolutionary, but rather a temple reformer. He saw the significance of the temple, he went to it, he cleansed it.

THE CHURCH: SIGNIFICANT FOR OUR MINISTRY

If the above exposition is true we learn at least one thing from this passage; in spite of all the corruption and blindness and power-politics and commercialization of the temple, Jesus did not abandon it—but rather continued to reform it. Luke adds, 'Every day he was teaching at the temple' ([Luke 19:47](#)). The temple was still Jesus' method, the arena of his ministry. Similarly, though the Church of our time is often corrupt and full of weaknesses and court cases and immoralities and seems dead, we as ministers of Christ dare not abandon it. My desire in my new job in the Theological Commission of the WEF is to relate our Theological Commission more essentially with churches and congregations. After all, theology is a function not of theological seminaries, but of the Church. The Church is still the theological community and the hermeneutical community.

The Church is still God's instrument, despite all her failures. God's calling and gifts are irrevocable, especially with respect to the Church. I am convinced that for India as a nation, the Christian Church is the only hope. The desperate need of our land is for men of integrity, and the Church is still the sole factory where such men are produced. Even in the face of all the religious and secular philanthropic agencies sprouting all over the globe, the Church still stands as the philanthropic agency par excellence.

This means that we at the Union Biblical Seminary must re-emphasize our roots and links with our churches all over the land. It does not take a prophet to say that the Seminary will survive to the extent it is Church-rooted and Church-oriented. This Church-orientedness [p. 280](#) must come out not just in our theology, but in our budgets and future plans. I look forward to the day when all the teaching faculty in the Union Biblical Seminary will necessarily be pastors or people with pastoral experience and that our Church relations department will be given a priority status in our administration. Unless our Seminary deliberately and consciously plans to link with and serve the Church in India it will dissipate itself as an evangelical force in the land.

All this means for you and me as seminarians is that we dare not abandon the Church—rather we are called to work in it and work for it. Para-church organizations have come because the Church has failed, but they have come as the reform movements within the Church. The Church is still the base for us.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not asking you to support the Church so that she may survive. Far from it! I am asking you to serve the Church for your own survival as a Christian disciple and a Christian minister. Whatever her lapse, the Church, the little flock, has received the promise ultimately to triumph. Even with the Union Biblical Seminary's Bachelor of Divinity degree, my wife and I got just Rs 180 per month as salary when we pastored a church in Hutti. Those were years of great financial and social difficulties. Yet we have always looked back on these years in the pastorate as the best years we have had thus far. We found a complete job-satisfaction. Jesus did not abandon the temple; let us also not abandon the Church. Let us work for the Church's renewal.

THE CHURCH: THE SOURCE OF SOCIAL ACTION

Jesus not only sought the temple and sought to reform it, he not only taught there daily, but he also performed some social action there. 'The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and healed them' (v. [14](#)). It is very significant that as some miscreants were running away from him, there are two kinds of people who were coming to him—namely, the beggars, the blind and the lame on the one hand and children on the other. These were not scared of Jesus, though the money makers were. The blind and lame had come to beg in the temple, but Jesus gave them much more than they were begging for; he took away their blindness and lameness, and so he took away their need to beg, thus giving them a security beyond what they were asking for. This is real social action indeed!

Friends, the success of your ministry is measured not by how many bishops, tycoons and church leaders approach you, but rather by how many needy and humble come to you. You may not be in the good [p. 281](#) books of the big guns of your church, you may not be known in evangelical circles all over the land or the world, but if you are known among the sick and the poor and the needy, praise God! You have been successful! And if Jesus' experience is any model for us, then, to the extent you have a great ministry among the needy, and are met with 'Hosanna to the Son of David' ([Matt. 21:15](#)) by insignificant people, to that extent your chief priests and scribes will be indignant at you. 'But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area "Hosanna to the Son of David", they were indignant'

(v. 15). They were indignant not at the children—at least not primarily as we have already seen. Jesus had foretold that it was the chief priests and the teachers of the law who would kill him, and these were aware that day by day Jesus was becoming more popular and more problematic to them. Jesus entered Jerusalem royally, they also knew that the whole city had received him as the Messiah. And this was exactly what they were opposing, the messiahship of Jesus. They had come to the temple in order to question him about this. Jesus did not fit in with their concept of Messiah, and so they were indignant at Jesus' 'blasphemous' claims. The children no doubt had caught the jumping and shouting 'Hosanna!' from the people at the Triumphal entry, and they had just continued with Jesus into the temple. So behind their question, 'Do you hear what these are saying?', the chief priests and the teachers are really asking, 'Is it true that you claim to be the Messiah? Are you the Messiah?' They wanted some concrete evidence about Jesus' blasphemy in order to legally arrest him.

Here we can see what I call the height of spiritual blindness of these leaders. On the one hand they heard the children shouting that Jesus is the Messiah, and on the other they saw with their own eyes, Jesus proving his Messiahship by healing the blind and the lame. According to the Old Testament only a Messiah could so heal. Not that they did not see the healing—the passage clearly tells us that they saw the healing and heard the children's shout simultaneously. Yet they rejected both! They rejected the evidence of messianic healing and they rejected the childish, or childlike proclamations because Jesus did not fit into their scheme of things. In contrast, it is the beggars and the children who had a better spiritual perception. Jesus' reply is equal to their question: 'Yes', replied Jesus, 'Have you never read "from the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise!"' (v. 16). 'And he left and went out of the city to Bethany' (v. 17). It is very unlike Jesus to leave so abruptly and end his conversation with them, especially as they were the leaders of the temple. The Lord seems to be p.282 grieved and angry with these leaders. He was grieved because they were so blind to facts and he was angry because as leaders they led people astray. So his answer really was: 'Yes I am the Messiah!' But they did not believe!

May God save each of us from such spiritual blindness. It is very possible that in real life situations, we too face such tests. It can be very difficult for you and me when we are in ministry, to accept for example, the fruitful work of some unimportant person, youth or lady or layman; it is easier to encourage and appoint those who are rich and influential. It is a great and very difficult virtue to recognize fruits and maturity in others, but so easy to find their loopholes and weaknesses. We can even misquote Scriptures to prove this! Jesus shows in the passage that the teachers and the priests were blind not only to the facts but also to the Scriptures! They read, but did not understand the Scriptures.

THE ROLE OF SMALL GROUPS/HOUSE-CELLS

'And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night' (v. 17). Jesus avoided Jerusalem as prophesied in the Scriptures as a judgment on the city. He stayed at night in Bethany just 3 km away from Jerusalem. Matthew does not tell us much about Bethany; the only other instances of his mentioning Bethany are when Simon the leper of Bethany invites Jesus for a Supper, and where Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly oil. Luke tells us that it is the place from which Jesus ascended into heaven after his resurrection. But John gives more information: it is in Bethany that the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus was situated, where Jesus habitually stayed. Jesus was intimately attached to this family. It is here that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and many Jews believed in Jesus. Thus, Bethany was Jesus' headquarters in Judea, just as Capernaum was his headquarters in Galilee.

The significance of this for us is this: In Bethany there was a house-church which Jesus founded and identified. The Bethany House Church appears often in Christian traditions and legends. This means that Jesus sought the fellowship of this Bethany cell, while he sought to reform the top-heavy Jerusalem temple. This is typical of our Lord. For example, though he chose twelve apostles, out of them he chose three for an inner circle, with whom he more often shared. We will do well to follow his model, it is possible that as a minister you will be isolated from all Christian fellowship. Often Bishops and the big church leaders have confessed such an isolation and have become spiritually dry. It is p. 283 impossible to live and work as isolated Christians. As ministers it will be a great strength for us to seek out two or three believers from our area and have regular fellowship and prayer with them. Without the undergirding of such an inner circle, our fruits, vision, even our faith can be in danger of being lost.

At this juncture in our church history the exhortation to Indian Christian ministers must therefore be: Never abandon the Church, the needy and humble as marginal in your ministry. Guard yourself against spiritual blindness by developing both a genuine openness to other and the fellowship of an inner circle.

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Book Reviews

FAITH AND CHURCH

The Present-Day Christological Debate

by Klaas Runia

Issues in Contemporary Theology, Series Editor I. H. Marshall
(Leicester: InterVarsity Press 1984)

Pp. 120, £4.50

Reviewed by R. Swanton in *The Reformed Theological Review*, May–August 1985

The substance of this book was originally presented as a paper for the Third Conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians held at Wölmersen, West Germany, in 1980.

The bird's eye view of modern Christological discussion commences with Barth, a dominant influence in the second quarter of the century, who was firmly rooted in the incarnation theology 'from above' of Nicea and Chalcedon, although his early theopascheitic tendency and later covenantal emphasis were to give some incentive to new trends. Of theologians within the last 20 years in the Barthian tradition, going beyond but not contradicting Chalcedon with its *vere Deus, vere homo*, stand Pannenberg and Moltmann, though the former's preferred methodology is a Christology 'from below', and the latter's speculative construction at certain points Hegelian rather than Scriptural.

On the other hand the 'kerygmatic Christ' of Bultmann was to evoke the reaction among post-Bultmannians of the taking of the historical Jesus as their starting point. All