**HAPPENINGS IN THE CHURCH**

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CHRISTIAN DISCRIMINATION AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

“Self-Pitying Christian Right--How Can We Practice Religion if We Can’t Discriminate?” is the title of an article by Brian Beutler on the March 4 progressive *Salon* website. It is the usual secular fare: Christians are prejudiced, oppressive, up-tight, ideologically driven, and are feeling sorry for themselves because government intervention now does not let them discriminate as they always have.

Let’s overlook the idea that Christians are ‘self-pitying.” Let’s overlook also the pejorative use of the label “Christian right.” What about the accusation that we Christians cannot practice religion if we can’t discriminate?

The direct answer is: we can’t. We are guilty as charged. By dictionary definition discriminate means to make good judgment; it can also mean to discern, or to distinguish. It also can mean to make a difference in treatment or favor on a basis other than individual merit (such as choosing a friend over a stranger). So it might mean to prefer the poor over the rich; the downtrodden over the privileged, and common persons over the academic elite. All moral judgments are based on discrimination: one action is preferred above another.

Perhaps the greatest discriminator of all was Jesus. Jesus distinguished between sheep on the right and goats on the left; between the foolish man who built his house on the sand and the wise man who built his house on the rock; he distinguished between the rich man and Lazarus at the gate. Jesus was hardly open and accepting of all persons. He had more to say about hell and gnashing of teeth and being thrown out on the rubbish heap that any other person in the Bible.

The Methodist General Rules follow Jesus in the exhortation to discriminate. United Methodists are to do good by…treating especially “them that are of the household of faith or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others; buying one of another, helping each other in business, and so much the more because the world will love its own and them only.”

The real issue is not, do we discriminate, but rather, on what basis do we discriminate? It would be wrong, indeed, sinful, for the Christian to discriminate on the basis of race or gender or age. But what about on the basis of actions or character? All of this relates to the debate taking place today about religious freedom, that is, about the freedom Christians have to exercise their faith apart from government or societal coercion. Secular progressives argue that Christians cannot discriminate on the basis of Christian convictions when those actions violate secular government policy. The secular progressive view is that religion is to be tolerated as long as it is practiced in private, but when it moves into the public square secular policy trumps religious expressions, and thus disqualifies them. Thus the government argues that because of Obamacare Hobby Lobby must make abortion pills available even if it violates the Christian conscience of the owners of Hobby Lobby. To the embarrassment of United Methodists this argument is also supported by the UM Board of Church and Society.

For over 20 years I have been involved with the Kokomo Rescue Mission, a ministry to the the least, the last and the lost The ministry seeks to make the wounded well, feed the hungry, heal the broken-hearted, redeem the lost, and break the powers of addiction. Hurting and broken and needy persons come through the doors of the mission daily: the drug addicts, the poor, the homeless, the abused, the felons, the troubled, and persons discarded. The job of the mission is to minister in the name of Christ, not just to give food and clothing and a place to sleep but additionally to bring hope and healing to broken lives, through the transformation which comes through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. We believe the transforming of persons is the best way to build a moral and just society.

Our government also has an interest in caring for those less fortunate. In large part because of the nation’s Christian heritage, our government seeks to fashion a just society through the guarding of civil rights and through the support of education, welfare, medical care, and other services. Christians generally support the efforts of government, but because of our understanding of the separation of church and state, government in turn does not always support religion. Government is supposedly neutral on religious matters. However, in the hands of secularists neutrality becomes itself a form of secular sectarianism which discriminates against some forms of religious expression.

What this means practically is that ministries like the Rescue Mission sometimes find themselves in conflict with government policy, particularly when it comes attached with government aid. Government aid cannot be used for religious purposes, yet everything the rescue mission does is for a religious purpose, that is, to exalt Jesus Christ through ministry to the least and last and lost.

So the Kokomo Rescue Mission and some other Christian organizations find it best to operate without government funding in order to be free to proclaim the saving nature of Jesus Christ, and to serve persons without government bureaucracy, complications, and secular restrictions. The mission serves 118,000 free meals a year but has decided not to accept government surplus food through agencies such as Food Finders, which assigns food as it sees fit, wants no religious ties connected with food distribution, requires all volunteers to be trained in civil rights (with 27,564 volunteer hours last year we would have to run several classes every week), has restrictions on what can be shared, what can be taken home, and who can eat it, and requires time for record keeping that could better be used in ministry.

In other areas such as hiring the mission is vulnerable to charges of discrimination. When one prospect for the job of cook was hired instead of another because the first exhibited a more consistent Christian witness, a civil rights complaint was filed In the complaint it was charged that cooking is not a ministry position. But for the mission cooking is a ministry position since all positions are ministry positions. Now the employees’ handbook has many pages on conditions for employment including commitment to the statement of faith and commitment to a Christian life-style which includes no alcohol, no drugs, no living together without benefit of marriage, among other things. The mission admittedly discriminates on bases of religion, ethics, and character.

When the mission acquired properties to help serve as a buffer to a drug-infested neighborhood, hoping to rent to persons with life-styles consistent with the mission’s purposes, two gay men tested the mission’s resolve by showing up to rent. To rent would have severely compromised the mission’s witness. In both our men’s program and our women’s program we give witness to the importance of marriage and the family. But by government policy we could not discriminate in housing against those who could not support our core values. So the mission simply had to take the rental off the market.

Secular progressives believe problems of poverty and homelessness are caused by income disparity, poor schools, inadequate welfare, underfunded recovery programs, and various kinds of discrimination. Christians see the basic human problem as sin, personal and social, which results in addictions, abuse, divorce, the break-up of the family, drug addiction, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, and teen-age pregnancy. The answer is not more government programs but the good news of Jesus Christ.

Does all of this result in “self-pitying” on the part of Christians since we are not always free by government restraint to live out Christian convictions? Hardly. Most Christians defend America and American democracy against all other world systems. For the most part religious freedom has allowed our land to flourish and our Christian ministries to flourish as in no other land. Local support for the Kokomo Rescue Mission is overwhelming. The two million dollar budget (plus another million in in-kind contributions) is covered by nearly 200 local churches, including all of the United Methodist Churches. Other support comes from businesses, the hospitals, the court system, the schools, the police, and the city government. This allowed the mission to provide (in 2013) 26,390 nights of shelter, programs for men and women and children resulting in changed lives, and a strong Christian witness in the community.

We do not see that kind of support on the part of secularists on behalf of world needs. We do not see that kind of support in nations dominated by other religious traditions. Let us rejoice in our rich Christian heritage as Americans. Let us rejoice also that we are free to discriminate: good against evil; a revealed moral code as against a moral code based on political power or personal preference; and for a living God who cares for the least and the last and the lost.