

THE VIRTUE OF UNPOPULARITY OR BEING COUNTER-CULTURAL

Ted Schroder, May 2, 2010

Popularity depends on the group you belong to. What makes you popular in one group may make you unpopular in another. A drunk is not popular in a prayer meeting. A teetotaler is not popular at a fraternity party. A fully covered Muslim woman is not popular in France. A Christian missionary is not popular in Saudi Arabia. Our belief in freedom of speech guarantees our right to disagree with prevailing views in the United States, even if this right does not exist in many other parts of the world. However we often choose not to say what we think if our opinion may be unpopular, or politically incorrect, or it will offend others. Sometimes we lack the courage of our convictions because we don't want to have to defend them. Paul told Timothy that "God did not give us a spirit of timidity (cowardice)."

Paul was in prison because of his convictions about Jesus. They were politically incorrect because they threatened the tyranny of the Roman emperor. Paul claimed that Jesus was the only Lord of all, and, by implication, that Caesar was not divine. He taught the words of Jesus that we are to seek first the kingdom of God, that there is a greater king than the state, and that all governing authorities were servants of God, and answerable to him. He spoke out against idolatry, the worship of fertility gods enshrined in material statues, such as the cult of Diana of the Ephesians. This made him unpopular with the silver merchants of Ephesus and led to a riot. (Acts 19) When he was eventually arrested and sent to trial in Rome, many in the Church whom he counted on for assistance, distanced themselves from him. "You know that everyone in the province of Asia deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes." Everyone, that is, except Onesiphorus who "often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me... You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus." (2 Timothy 1:15-18)

Here is a study in contrasts. Those who have the courage of their beliefs and were willing to stand up for them and support their spokesman, and those who melted away into the crowd when they became unpopular. Courage was the willingness to stand out as an individual like Onesiphorus, when it was dangerous to do so, rather than going along with what was politically expedient.

"True individuality is measured by this: how long or how far one can endure being alone without the understanding of others. The person who can endure being alone is poles apart from the social mixer. He is miles apart from the man-pleaser, the one who manages successfully with everyone – he who possesses no sharp edges. God never uses such people... Christ says: Beware of men! The majority of people are not only afraid of holding a wrong opinion, they are afraid of holding an opinion *alone*. ... Wanting to hide in the crowd, to be a little fraction of the group instead of being an individual, is the most corrupt of all escapes. Granted, it will make life easier, but it will do so by making it more thoughtless... No witness to the truth dares to get involved with the crowd... He avoids the crowd with its herd mentality. Those who speak to the crowd, coveting its approval, those who deferentially bow and scrape before it must be regarded as being worse than prostitutes. They are instruments of untruth. If you want to be loathsome to God, just run with the herd." (Soren Kierkegaard)

Who are the heroes whom we admire? Those who have stood for truth and justice alone against the crowd, like Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

There is a difference between courage and cowardice. Paul urged Timothy, who was the leader of the church in Ephesus, to have the courage of his convictions. “So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life.” (2 Timothy 1:8,9) In other words, “don’t be embarrassed to witness to your convictions about the Lordship of Jesus, or of my imprisonment, because of my witness to the gospel.” There are greater virtues than popularity or safety. If Christians in Germany had followed Paul’s instructions in the 1930’s Hitler might not have succeeded in his evil schemes. For lack of courage many millions of people were slaughtered. The desire for safety and popularity has ruined the faithful witness of too many. Jesus knew this danger when he warned his disciples:

“Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man.” (Luke 6:22)

“Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.” (Luke 6:26)

“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:38)

Jesus identified the world as being hostile to him and the kingdom of God. He characterized it as being sinful and adulterous – rebellious against God, and unfaithful to his love, like a husband who is cheating on his wife. Standing alone for Christ and his teaching today is still unpopular in many circles.

What is the source of courage for those who are willing to be unpopular and counter-cultural? It is because of the knowledge that God has a purpose for your life that is bigger than the present and will be fulfilled in eternity no matter what man does to you. “This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought immortality to light through the gospel.” Paul was not ashamed of this gospel, because he had confidence in God who was able to guard him and the truth he witnessed to. “I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.” What has Paul entrusted to the safekeeping of God? The good deposit of the pattern of sound teaching, which he has passed on to Timothy to guard. “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in you.”

The culture will continually attack the gospel and seek to replace its pattern of sound (i.e. healthy) teaching with something seemingly more comfortable and acceptable to public opinion. The Christian witness is called to guard its purity as a treasure is to be guarded from being stolen by thieves. The gospel, as Paul has handed it on to Timothy, is a precious thing that is placed in our custody for our generation. With the help of the Holy Spirit we can witness to it, and pass it on, even when it is unpopular and counter-cultural. We need the courage to witness to the truth: about ourselves, about what we believe, even when it may be unpopular. The gospel is worth guarding and defending. We should not be ashamed of it.

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