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I AM A ROLE MODEL

As I stopped at the main gate at Kirtland Air Force Base I handed the security guard my retired ID card. He looked at the card, then at me.

He said, "I know you from somewhere. Do you go to the Church of Christ on the west side by the river?"

Surprised, I replied that I did. He told me he thought he recognized me from there. He said he had been there a few times because his mother attended there. He told me who his mother was. He continued that he had gone to the church across the street from us for a while, then moved out of that area and so stopped going there. We exchanged pleasantries and I drove onto the base.

Recently I heard a preacher speak about the teenagers of the congregation. He said that the younger children in the congregation look to them to be role models even more than they look to their parents or other adults. They look to the teenagers as the "cool" kids. (Although they may not use that word any more.)

These two incidents point out something very important, and perhaps very scary. People are watching us. Even when we don't realize it, people are noticing us. Granted, as the person who welcomes people and makes announcements, as a songleader, and as a teacher, I may have more visibility in the congregation than some other people. But realizing that someone who visited for just a few times can recognize me in a totally new context brings home the fact that people may notice you when you might not give it a second thought. Charles Barkley's comments notwithstanding, everyone is a role model, either positively or negatively.

Paul the apostle understood this. He knew that what we do in public can affect others directly. Some things (eating meat, eating meat offered to idols) may not be wrong in themselves, but become wrong because of how we influence others with our actions. "For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak." (Rom 14:20-21)

It is possible, then, for us to do something totally neutral, in relation to sin, and have a negative influence. Sometimes even doing something right may appear wrong. People make snap judgements, whether they should or not. You go into a liquor store to make a phone

call for someone whose car broke down. That is good, but if someone makes an uninformed judgement on seeing you leave, perhaps it would have been better to use a phone in the grocery store next door. You are trying to reach the prostitutes on the street with the gospel. Someone driving by thinks you are trying to be a client. In the first example, a better choice might have been available. In the second, one must do what one must regardless of how it appears to others. We must consider how we appear before others. We do not necessarily have to use that consideration as an excuse not to do something we ought to be doing.

Some have said, "If you are going to drive like other people drive, please don't put a church bumper sticker on your car." Others say they will put such a sticker on their vehicle, just so that they will remember to obey the laws. They will realize their influence, and it forces them to change their ways.

Maybe that should be the key point in realizing our visibility. When we know that God is watching, it often has little effect on our actions. When we know that other people are watching, we should act as if God is watching. How we act in front of other people will have an effect on their lives. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matt 5:16) Peter told wives that their influence was far-reaching. "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear." (1 Pet 3:1-2)

Someone is watching you. It may be someone you know. It may be a stranger. Let them see God in you.

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IT'S NOT A NAME

Growing up in the churches of Christ, I often heard the argument about how wrong the Baptists, Methodists, and others were because they used a name for the church not found in the Bible. The denominational Church of Christ argued that at least their name could be found in scripture. While I agree with that argument in principle, I have problem with agreeing in fact. The church is not given a name in Bible. There are several designations for the church, but these are more in the nature of description than name. That may be a fine distinction, but important.

The church has no name. A name implies it is a distinct entity. My children have names because they are separate from me. My feet do not have names, because they are part of me. In the same way, the church is part of the body of Christ, and so has no name. My feet are simply Tim's feet. That is not a name but a description. The church is the body of Christ. That is not a name but a description.

That said, the church has several descriptions in Bible. It might be instructive to look at some of these to learn more about what the church truly should be like.

The way

One designation for the church in scripture is "this way." Even some outside the church apparently called it the way. "And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they

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were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem." (Acts 9:2) "And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women." (Acts 22:4)

If the church is the way, to what is it the way? What kind of a way is it?

Foremost, it is the way to God. Since the church is the body of Christ, it is the path of right. "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6)

Can one come to God without being in the church? People argue, "I can follow God just as well by myself as in the church." An old catch-phrase was, "Jesus yes; the church no." How does Jesus feel about that? Can we come to God as well without being in the way? Can one be in Christ without being in his body?

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. (Jn 15:4-6)

Anyone who chooses not to walk in the way becomes fruitless. He is good for nothing but burning.

The church is the way of righteousness. John was shown a figurative representation of the church in Revelation 21 and 22. Of that church he was told, "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie." (Rev 22:14-15)

Peter also knew of the church as the way of righteousness. He warned against leaving that way.

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. (2 Peter 2:20-21)

The faith

Of all the descriptions of the church, the most common may be "the faith." Paul uses the phrase frequently. Sometimes it is used in reference to the system of faith in general, but even then, one can hardly distinguish between the faith in broad terms and "the faith" as descriptive of the church. You can't have one without the other.

Referring to the faith implies one corollary and one result. By making reference to "the" faith, with the definite article, one necessarily states that it is the only valid faith. It is not one among many; it is one and only. That has far-reaching consequences for the church. If there is but one faith there are not "many roads to God." Peter said, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for

there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Since the church is the body of, and wears the name of, Christ, there is no other way to salvation. This is not a popular idea. Some even accuse God of exclusivity. It is true, though that the church is exclusive as well as inclusive. It excludes in that there is no other way to God. It includes because anybody may choose the right path; nobody is turned away that chooses to come to God.

The consequence of the idea of “the faith” is a commonality of purpose. Any organization exists for a purpose or it dies. If its members do not share at least the purpose of the organization they leave. It is the same with the church. We share the faith. It is a body with the commonality of a saving faith. We may have many differences: racial, political, economic. Nevertheless, we have something overridingly in common. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

The church

The term “the church” relates to the manner of gathering: it is an assembly. Some people ask, “Do I have to go to church?” The common answer relates to the previous point: if you have a common faith why would you not want to assemble together? Another answer, though, is that if you don’t “go to church” you cannot be part of the church. If a church is a body called together in an assembly, one who chooses not to be part of that assembly cannot be part of that church.

Each Greek city-state had its own assembly. When city business was to be conducted, all the citizens were “called out” to the town square or another gathering place. Decisions were made based on the majority of people present. The old idea (ancient, really) is that if you don’t vote you don’t have a right to complain about the results. It was true then as well. If you did not show up for the assembly, you had no part in the government. The church is the same. If you are not present, you are not considered part of the body. You have cut yourself off from Christ and his body.

Another, incidental, implication is that each congregation is independent of all others, just as each Greek city-state was independent. A resident of another town could not vote in a city not his own. Although we are part of one body, yet each congregation is made up of, responsible to, and responsible for, its individual members in attendance. The only hierarchy is the head, which is Christ.

Churches of Christ

The designation “churches of Christ” appears only once. “The churches of Christ salute you.” (Rom 16:16) It

is used to show the ownership of the church. It is not a name, just as “Tim’s feet” (or, to put it in this format, “the feet of Tim”) is not a name. It states simply that the church belongs to Jesus the Christ. It is distinguished from the church that belongs to a method, or another person, or a doctrine. In that sense, my old teachers had a point. A congregation that calls itself the “Campbellite Church” would be saying they belong to a man named Campbell. A congregation that calls itself a “Baptismal Church” would be saying that they belong to the doctrine of immersion. While immersion is a good thing, and a person named Campbell may have been a good teacher, they are not the purpose of or owners of the church. Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build MY church.” (Matt 16:18, emphasis mine) He wants people in his church, not in someone else’s or something else’s churches.

It may also be significant that Paul used the plural in Romans 16:16. Again, each congregation is

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autonomous (independent). Each congregation may have its own elders. Other congregations are not subject to the elders of any congregation but their own. If a man, such as Diotrephes (3 John 9), gains control of a congregation for his own ends and refuses to recognize a man, such as Gaius, as a Christian, that does not mean that any other congregation has the right, without independent evaluation, to refuse a Gaius. If a congregation falls prey to false teachers, that does not mean that other congregations must follow suit. In this it is like the difference between a picture window and a lattice window. A picture window is one large pane of glass. If someone throws a rock and puts a hole in the window, the whole pane of glass has to be replaced. A lattice window has many smaller panes. If a rock breaks one, that is the only pane that has to be replaced. The rest of the window is sound. If one congregation teaches error, only that congregation needs to be corrected. The rest of the church remains sound.

Although these are only descriptions, the church does have a name. It bears the name of him whose body we are. We are his hands and feet, but in this world our name is Jesus.

IS RELIGION A BAD WORD?

If one listens to some of the songs currently popular on Christian radio stations, it is easy to get a wrong picture of religion. It seems that religion has become something to “go beyond” or that is a weight to drag a person down. Religion, it seems, has become a word that seems to mean mere rote obedience with no consideration for faith and no redeeming value in itself. How different that is from the original meaning of the word, and the picture painted in the Bible.

Religion, in English, comes from the Latin for “to tie again.” The idea is that religion is that which binds us to God. In the Greek, however, it comes from a root word meaning to tremble. The idea is that religion is an expression of fear or awe toward God.

Expression of that awe for God has taken many forms. Perhaps the most common expression in the Bible was falling on one’s face. Now, that may simply mean bowing prostrate in God’s presence, but just maybe it can be taken literally. Religion to people like Moses, Abraham, Balaam, Ezekiel, Joshua, Daniel, and even Jesus, may have consisted of literally falling hard, face-down, in the presence of God. It seems that the actual presence of God (or the angel of God, which in the Old Testament may have been God himself) is sufficient to make a mere human lose all muscle tone.

What does that say about us? When we come before God in prayer, do we literally fall in fear? For most of us the answer is no. Nor is it necessarily wrong if we do not do so. It would make praying while driving a bit dangerous. If our religion does not include such an awe of our creator and savior, then maybe we don’t need to “go beyond” religion, but rather go up to religion. If having a proper respect for God is a weight around your ankle, then

don’t pretend to be religious. God may drag you down to your knees or further, but that is a good thing, not something to be avoided.

James tells his readers that there is another expression of religion. “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” (James 1:27) It might be theoretically possible that one could go beyond the first part of this verse. Rather than visiting the homeless, a person might also give to those who have their own visible means of support. It is difficult to achieve the latter phrase, much less to “go beyond” keeping oneself unspotted.

When one singer says that all religion has been to him is a weight around his feet, one should wonder what he means. Is helping those in need a burden? Is following Christ a weight? There are solutions. One would be to quit playing at religion entirely. If following God is a burden, why put up with it? The other choice would be to learn to want to do the will of God. Sometimes people expect the feeling to come first, and the actions will follow. That is, if I love God then I will help the widows and orphans. In reality, though, many people need to learn from Stanislavsky. His famous “method” of acting says, in a very simplified form, if you do the action you will get the feeling. For the purpose of this discussion, this means that if one practices religion, one will develop the motivation. If we help others because God says to, then that will, in itself, cause us to love God. If we do our best to avoid sin, then we will learn to love the sinless one. If one practices pure religion, after a while it is no longer a burden but a blessing. It’s pretty hard to go beyond that.

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