
ELIJAH SPEAKS TRUTH TO POWER

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By Jim
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The word of the Lord came to Elijah...saying, Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who lives in Samaria: behold, he is even now taking possession of the vineyard of Naboth, whom he has had slain that he might seize his property. You shall speak to him, saying, Thus says the Lord, Have you killed and also taken possession? Then tell him, “Thus says the Lord, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your blood, even yours.” Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, my enemy?” Elijah replied, “I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do that which is evil in the sight of God.”
I Kings 21:17-20, paraphrased

As you know, I'm interested in encouraging organized religion to take a stronger stand against public economic injustice in the form of wide gaps in personal income levels, corporate malfeasance, financial manipulation, inequitable tax burdens, and resource depletion and destruction. It seems as if most religious effort is devoted to personal issues like salvation and right living, with very little left over for attention to broader issues of public justice. But that isn't the path pointed out in Scripture.

There are scores of instances in the Bible when prophets representing religion forthrightly spoke out against injustice in high places. They often did so at the risk of their lives, since back then there were no constitutional protections, juries, public defenders, or any redress against executive abuse of power. Kings and potentates could do as they wished, and usually did.

The prophet Elijah was one such voice speaking truth to power whatever the personal cost. In this example he spoke to Ahab, a deceitful and cruel king of Israel who also happened to be married to the fabled evil queen, Jezebel. Ahab coveted the vineyard of a common citizen named Naboth, and offered to trade other land for the vineyard. Naboth refused, citing inheritance strictures, leaving Ahab in a depressed state. When Jezebel heard this, she determined to use her power to eliminate Naboth by hiring

several criminals to publicly accuse him of blasphemy, a sin punished by death.

Upon hearing

this "good" news, Ahab arose to take possession of the vineyard. His action in happily accepting the fruits of evil made him as guilty as Jezebel.

The Lord

then instructs Elijah to confront Ahab, who asks, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" Elijah then speaks truth to power by answering, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to work evil in the sight of the Lord."

It's

interesting that Ahab considered Elijah an enemy; probably because this wasn't the first time Elijah had confronted him with his sin. That's one major role of prophets, to expose sin and its perpetrators. The primary loyalty and obedience of prophets is to God rather than men. That doesn't mean that they seek out ways of being troublesome, but that they truthfully and fearlessly identify public evil wherever they encounter it, not attacking the perpetrators but publicly confronting and exposing their sin.

Today we

certainly have enough public sin to occupy the attention of thousands of prophets. But where are they? Where are the prophetic cries against financial, political, and social oppression? Where are the Elijahs, Nathans, Daniels, Ezras, Isaiahs, and Jeremiahs of today? You don't hear them often because they and their religious institutions have lost the prophetic imperative of Scripture, preferring to expound the "feel-good" gospel and "cheap grace."

Their excuse

usually is either that constitutional "separation of church and state" prevents them from speaking out on public issues, or that they are preaching the much more important "gospel" of Jesus Christ. Both are excuses, not reasons.

Yes, they

shouldn't support political parties or organizations, but this in no way prevents them from stating what God says about moral and ethical questions. They might also realize that the gospel preached by Jesus dealt with issues of the day from an ethical position, even though it did not openly attack political powers like Rome.