

The case for saying no to God

Kevin Derksen

In a homily on Isaiah 6, Origen offers a fascinating commentary on the sending of the prophet. Isaiah, Origen suggests, may have been a little too eager in taking up the summons. Where Moses does his best to escape God's call at the burning bush (Exod. 3–4), Isaiah volunteers himself. "Send me," he says, without knowing what he might be bidden to say or whether in fact he has been chosen at all. Isaiah quickly discovers to his horror what it is that he has signed up for. The words given to him are curses: the

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people will hear but not understand, see but not perceive meaning. Harden their hearts, says the Lord, until all the cities are destroyed and the country is a wasteland. Perhaps, comments Origen, Isaiah receives the reward of his rashness in the undesirable prophecies he is bidden to utter. Better, like Moses or even Jonah, to do whatever one can to run away. This, Origen suggests, is more in keeping with the example of a servant Christ who stoops to wash his disciples' feet. The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over one another in their aspirations to glory, but it should not

be so among followers of Christ (Matt. 20:25). Those called do well to protest not only their inadequacy but the fearful difficulty of the call itself. For then God might have space to say, as to Moses at the bush, that God alone makes people to speak and God alone makes people to hear.¹

Confronting the absurdity of our calling

Origen's reflections give me pause, because I have just recently received ordination in the Mennonite Church. I have publically embraced God's call, had it affirmed and confirmed by the church,

and been commissioned for a lifetime of ministry. I have heard it said that you should go into ministry only if you absolutely cannot avoid the call, counsel that leaves me to wonder whether I have put enough effort into resistance. Responding to God's call, it seems, involves a critical moment of rejection. There is something

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important about saying no to God, about confronting the absurdity of a calling that sends an unworthy vessel to a task that is doubtless distasteful by most worldly standards. And though this theme catches me in the context of ordination, it extends beyond the call to ministerial leadership. Ordination is a baptismal act, extending in a particular way God's summons to the waters of baptism. Any faith that passes through the waters must also confront the call that stops Moses and

Jonah in their tracks. All the more so in an upside-down church that marks its difference by the baptism of adult believers.

No one has pleaded more eloquently than Søren Kierkegaard for the faithfulness of saying no to God. The Christendom church of nineteenth-century Denmark, he complains, contains no shortage of those who have said yes to God. But it also contains little evidence of particularly Christian faith. In this context, Kierkegaard picks up the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 21:28–31.² A man has two sons, and to each he gives instruction to go work in his vineyard. The first son answers that he will not, but he later changes his mind and goes to work. The second son answers with much respect that he will go, but then he does not. Jesus asks: "Which of the two did the will of the father?" Kierkegaard replies that the one who says no is much closer to obedience than the one who makes an easy promise. The yes of the promise made by the second son is a trap. The one who promises easily deceives both himself and others that what was promised has actually been done. The yes of the promise is sleep inducing, like a repetitive habit. It skirts obedience by failing to ever confront the seriousness of the task. The no of the first son, by contrast, is closer to obedience, because it leaves him closer to repentance. The no is like a wake-up call, a splash of cold water that brings him to himself. Repentance, says Kierkegaard, is not usually far away. It is

better to say no and in so doing confront the great difficulty of obedience. The first son at least recognizes his own prodigality, something the second son avoids with his deferential response.

Rethinking the visible church

The upside-down church of Anabaptist sensibility has, we might say, taken Kierkegaard's advice. It is a church given shape by those who have actually gone out into the vineyard—those who have claimed the path of obedience for themselves and submitted to baptism as adults. In the context of mainline Christian tradition, Anabaptist parents say no to God on behalf of their children in refusing to have them baptized as infants. They say no so as to create space for repentance and obedience, cutting off the possibility of an empty promise that never enters the vineyard but never confronts the reality of its own prodigal nature either. The true prodigal, according to upside-down Anabaptists, is the son

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For the upside-down church, then, visibility becomes an important category. It protests against the invisibility of a mixed church composed alike of those who actually work in the vineyard and those who have never darkened its gates. A church of prodigal-yet-repentant vineyard workers takes on a concrete shape in the world, and Mennonite

theology has made much of this visibility as the crux of its witness. An upside-down church requires an other, a standard of human convention against which it can reasonably be called upside-down. Often this other is the "world," but equally often it is the rest of the church that remains tragically right-side-up. As Anabaptists, we have a veritable obsession with our own distinctiveness. Contemporary Mennonite church literature and conversation is deeply concerned with what distinguishes us, with what provides the visibility on which an upside-down church trades. The literature is saturated with efforts to identify the "Anabaptist difference," be it cast in terms of core values or vital rhythms or naked essentials.

Given this state of affairs, I find it striking that what concerns Kierkegaard as he reads Jesus's parable is also a certain kind of visibility, the visibility of promises that are easily made but are fulfilled only with much greater difficulty and in less evident ways. At the level of surface visibility, the son who says yes responds faithfully. But the one who truly enters the vineyard is the one whose heart is shaped and re-formed through a process of repentance which may be harder to see. Visibility can easily become a site of admiration, a return to oneself in pride, which for Kierkegaard is the mark of non-Christian love of self.

Finding ourselves in an infinite debt of gratitude

It is always possible for the upside-down character of the church to become a source of pride rather than a fearful cross to bear. The strangeness of the church in its visible otherness can be a temptation to claim for itself the shape and means of God's activity in the world. But upside-down or not, the church exists to

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point away from itself and toward the God revealed in the scandal of a crucified Messiah. The posture of this witness is ever penitential, ever repeating the movement of the first son from rejection to repentance to the vineyard.

The one to whom we bear witness, says Kierkegaard, is the one who said neither yes nor no, "because his food was to do his father's will."³ Christ is one with the Father, his love finally fulfilling the law. This is good news for us, but it is good news that leaves us in an infinite debt, to which we are called infinitely to remain. It reduces us to nothing, to the "rubbish of the world" (1 Cor. 4), no

matter how obedient, how faithful, how loving, or how upside-down we might be. We do well not to say yes to this good news too quickly, for truly it is a fearful and even offensive summons. The one who will enter the vineyard in imitation of Christ will doubtless first recoil and turn away. Perhaps it is, then, that the faithfulness of an upside-down church depends on a reinvigorated no to God. The movement of this response chastens the pride of visibility, recalling with Origen that the shape of the church's

strangeness is the stooping of its master to wash his disciples' feet. Though the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over one another in their aspirations to glory, it should not be so among you.

Now I find myself on the far side of ordination's yes to God. Is it too late to run away?

Notes

¹ Origen, "Homily 6.1 on Isaiah," in *The Pastor: Readings from the Patristic Period*, ed. Philip Culbertson and Arthur Shippee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 37–39. Origen was a third-century theologian who lived in Alexandria, Egypt. His many writings include exegetical works and commentaries as well as homilies on most biblical texts.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 91–95.

³ *Ibid.*, 99.

About the author

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