

Beck and Call: Looking for Social Justice in the Wrong Places

Ken Briggs | Mar. 13, 2010 NCR Today

Almost overnight, Glenn Beck has become Irritator in Chief. He sends legions of left-leaning Americans into fits of apoplexy with a deft turn of phrase. His laser-tongue attacks are typically vile but his method is impeccable. He knows how to rile.

His latest poison arrow was aimed at Christians who think social justice has something to do with the Gospels. It doesn't, he declares, instructing his followers to bolt any church that sponsors such causes.

Beck hates socialiam and believes social justice is its handmaiden. Anything smacking of it it is likely in his calculus to lead to the dreadnaught of Big Government.

I'm not convinced that he is seriously targeting churches, however. Churches are not real threats, he seems to say, mostly potential ones. After all, very few parishes would be found guilty of sticking their necks out for social change aimed at justice (notable, mostly isolated exceptions, of course). Their relative silence on health care is but the latest evidence.

Congregations do plenty of charity and volunteer work but only a tiny fraction engage in action to correct social, economic or political wrongs. That takes nothing away from the compassion expressed in feeding the hungry. The prevalence of those worthy efforts only places the paucity of justice activism in sharp relief.

Social justice may require no more energy than efforts to maintain a homeless shelter -- perhaps even less. But it does involve more testing by fire, standing up for divisive policies in public and, yes, embracing the Gospel's call to affirm the dignity of each human being.

We may differ as to what causes and purposes to into that mandate, but it's presence in Jesus' ministry and message is unmistakable.

The problem is that it's so often ignored or hidden under layers of institutional priorities and spiritual comforters. Beck's warning doesn't claim that there is widespread commitment by churches to social justice. He only sees the danger that it could crop up here and there. If it does, he counsels his flock, flee.

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