

Michael Weed: A Careful Critic

by Allan J. McNicol

I have been asked today to say a few words concerning the contribution of Michael Weed to this school. The occasion is the announcement this spring of his retirement from full-time teaching. I have known Michael since 1962 when we were both students at Abilene. I had just arrived in Texas from Australia and Michael served as one of the resident supervisors in the campus dormitory in which we lived. Since that time, with the exception of the period 1967-1974, when we both were pursuing higher degrees at other places, our careers have overlapped. For well over the past thirty years we have worked together as colleagues at this school.

Having been together for so long means that there are lots of stories. Michael has related them around the faculty lunch table many times; but most of you only visit the school once a year, so you are probably not interested in the personal eccentricities and plays on human frailty that make the stories interesting. Today, I would like to have a different focus. What is there about Michael's pilgrimage that may be of interest to an audience like this? Many of you have kept most of those old issues of *Christian Studies* that house much of the best of his writings. Are there themes there and in his teaching and churchmanship that could be helpful to you as you seek to make your ministry more fruitful? I think so.

Dissolving a Myth

Of course, you cannot separate entirely the man from his writings. Let me start by doing a little of what a certain kind of literary critic might call "deconstructing" as it applies to Michael Weed the person.

Some people have bought into a mythology that Michael is gripped by a kind of Paleolithic pathology. Supposedly this pathology makes him totally resistant to any kind of change. I happen to think that this a convenient caricature invented by his critics so that they will not have to deal with his work seriously. It is easy to dismiss someone's ideas by implying that he lives in the fifties of the last century secluded from the rough and tumble world of contemporary decision making.

This is not the Michael Weed I know. He is not an obscurantist. Sometimes he acts like a curmudgeon: yes. But, at the same time, he is an insightful and creative analyst of modernity -- and if you insist -- post-modernity -- especially as it affects the church. And if we do not pay attention to what he is saying I will argue that we will be much the poorer for it.

You see, in a small school, sometimes we are called upon to wear many hats. I think one that Michael likes to wear proudly is that of sociologist of religion. That is his great love. He sees clearly that we live and make most of our decisions within a socially constructed reality. Michael has noted that. It is a fact of great importance. Ever since Auguste Comte and later Max Weber the sociologists of religion have been mesmerized by the ongoing march of secularization in the West. Michael has done us a service by chronicling regularly secularization's corrosive impact; not so much on the state churches of Europe, but on Churches of Christ (both urban and rural) in America. He has been a practitioner of Tip O'Neill's dictum, "all politics is local" -- in a religious sense. He is saying that if you would only look carefully you can see these same forces that Weber detailed gnawing away at the faith of good people in your local church. If you are a good shepherd you need to watch for it and, if possible, do something intelligent about it! To me, from his earlier writings in *Christian Studies*, through the volume on *The Worldly Church*,

down until his recent criticisms of some of the banalities we parade forth in the cause of marketing the church, his mission has been to alert us about these things.

This does not mean that he is a forlorn pessimist. Michael has always said that there is much to be concerned about in the contemporary church; but he has also reminded us that our trust and hope is not in ourselves, but in the Creator and Redeemer who justifies us and will raise the dead. And as to the charge that he is an opponent of change he has a ready response -- "If you find a better way to do it, I will embrace it as long as it is faithful to the gospel."

Weed as Teacher

One other thing. Let me say a word about his contribution to this school. When he came here in 1974 the school functioned as a Bible Chair associated with the University of Texas. UT would only give credit for lower division courses (freshman and sophomore) in Bible. Our students wanted and needed more expansive training in the theological disciplines in preparation for teaching and leadership in the churches. Michael was tasked to set up a program to do this. This program was successful; other faculty members were added and it became known as the Institute for Christian Studies. Later, of course, it became Austin Graduate School of Theology. Weed was the heart and soul of this early program. So much so that I often kidded him by calling it "Weed's Institute."

As the years went by two developments came about that may be of interest to this audience.

First, from the beginning, we set up the Institute to train leaders in Churches of Christ. What we didn't count on was that considerable numbers outside our fellowship were hungry for credible biblically based teaching in Bible, theology and church leadership. They wanted in. We soon found that this kind of teaching had a constituency ranging from Catholics to Pentecostals. We leveraged our experience in the Bible Chair in teaching others outside our tradition to assist us in this enterprise. In the heart of the Bible belt here was a place where we did not make any apology for our affiliation with Churches of Christ. This willingness to share what we have with others outside our fellowship has been a mark of the school since the earliest days of the Institute. To this day this ecumenical focus is a feature of our school. Our student body comes from a wide spectrum of theological communities. This trend toward receiving considerable numbers outside our fellowship is now developing in some of our sister schools. But we were the pioneers.

A second comment can be linked to what we just said. Given the pluralism of our student body, we have become strongly aware of our need to reaffirm, and in some areas, recover a sense of the importance of our heritage as a restorationist community. It is not unusual for an Episcopalian student to walk into our bookstore and seek to find some materials about us. Who are these people who call themselves Churches of Christ anyway?

As we have noted, in all of this Michael has had a central role. A lifelong Austinite, he was personally acquainted with people like the Showalters, Reul Lemmons and Ralph Sweet. He has passed on to us some of the stories about the earlier heroes. But it is not enough simply to be a conservator of the past. There is much to be done in reflecting on where we are going and whether we articulate a credible theological tradition. How can our churches survive in this time of massive change? We believe that properly construed, the Stone-Campbell movement has something to say to the theological world. If people like us who teach under the banner of this

tradition do not deal with it creatively and credibly, who will? Through his editorship of *Christian Studies*, Michael has been keenly aware of this challenge. He has fostered a kind of ecclesiastical scholarship that seeks to show that our theological tradition has integrity. We can stand toe-to-toe with others; not only in our ability to read texts and do traditional theology, but to pass on credibly a vital theological tradition.

Perennial Themes

So, speaking of *Christian Studies*, as we move to closure let me highlight two of the many themes that may be worth a fresh look at what Michael has to say. In 1982 in the *Faculty Bulletin* (*predecessor to *Christian Studies*) Michael wrote an essay titled, “The Twilight of the Gods: Pluralism, Morality, and the Church.” In many ways I see this essay as a harbinger of the major themes of his writings. He started off by saying that every society has a set of basic beliefs, “self-evident” truths which shape its common life. With respect to Western society, pluralism has eroded many of these traditional beliefs. So much so, both for the society and the self, that these beliefs now function or are reckoned as not much more than personal preferences. Michael quotes Max Weber to say the old gods are in decline and the new ones have not arrived. In America the old amalgam of a stable society: having a set of common beliefs (whether you are Catholic, Protestant or Jew), and a common stake in the culture, is rapidly eroding as well. In light of this, what is the church to do? Weed’s answer is not for the church to become captive to the age (the supplier of its religious fix) but to recover again a sense of the transcendent nature of the divine One. Through the proclamation of the gospel the church must be the place where the divine vision is presented and lived in such a way that it is able to furnish a total cohesive view of reality for the people of God.

Here then we began to hear many of the themes that would serve later as the basis for several chapters in *The Worldly Church*. They are just as relevant today. In a time when many in the church are still running sprints to keep up with an even more debased culture I would submit Weed’s diagnosis is still a good word to be heard.

Finally, I would draw your attention to Weed’s latest essay in *Christian Studies* 24 titled “American Fundamentalists: The Left Behind.” This is part of a wider project where he is wrestling with our failure in Churches of Christ to take seriously the importance of sanctification for the Christian life. Weed sees this as a longstanding problem for restorationists. It is often fueled by a legalistic approach to scripture. So often, scripture is read as simply supplying a list of directives (mainly restrictions and prohibitions) about the Christian life. This is done with precious little emphasis on how we develop holiness. He quotes Carl Henry as seeing that Jesus saw two weaknesses in this kind of moral legalism.

One is that even if the gospel were law, man can keep it outwardly as he sins inwardly. The other is the impracticality of making a law corresponding to every situation that might occur.

We wrestle with these kinds of questions continually. Weed thinks it is because of an inadequate attention given to sanctification. As I said, he is working on providing resources for us to develop a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a holy people. We need a perspective that leads us beyond a static view of the Christian life which is still endemic among us.

This is only a sample of the type of themes that Weed has reflected upon. He has an essay in every issue of *Christian Studies*. One could do worse than spend an afternoon going through those essays from beginning to end.

Conclusion

For close to four decades Michael Weed has worked in this small school in Austin alerting people to worrisome trends in the wider culture that are having a deep impact on the church. From time to time, as faculty chair, I would see the assessments of students of Dr. Weed's work in the classroom. I remember well the comment of one student. "Dr. Weed is so extremely careful to make sure that you understand a particular author or doctrine and not represent it falsely." I thought that was interesting. To me it sums up much of what Michael is about. Ironically, some of his critics have misrepresented him. This has hurt him. We can disagree. But I would urge those who take issue -- if you are going into the public domain it would be nice if you were truthful. For better or worse Michael has chosen the role of carefully speaking truth to power. We salute him for a job well done.

AJM/rk
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