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**Jesus' temple-clearing raises the difficult issue of when  
business strategies and values in the church interfere  
with worship.**

*Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), CHRIST DRIVING THE TRADERS FROM THE TEMPLE, 1832.  
Oil on mahogany, 92.1 x 70.5 cm. Copyright © Tate, London 2003.*

# Past the Blockade

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

All four gospels highlight the significance of Jesus' clearing of the temple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke place this event in the last week of Jesus' ministry; in John, it is a motif of the gospel story. "Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves," Matthew reports. "He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers'" (21:12-13). Temple authorities, the "robbers," required worshipers to use temple coins to buy sacrificial animals, but charged high interest and gave low exchange rates for the Roman coins of the people.

Jesus was equally concerned with worship practices as with business procedures. His reference to Isaiah 56:7 reminds us the role of his house has been defined before, but has been forgotten. "The moneychanging was in the one place that non-Jewish worshipers could pray, and the commotion made their worship impossible," Craig Blomberg notes. "The application of Jesus' temple-clearing is not to mandate what can or can't be sold in a church building but the more difficult issue of when we allow church to be turned into a business in ways that compromise worship" (see p. 25).

Biblical stories were not a typical subject for Turner, an English artist best known for his romantic landscape paintings in watercolor and oil. He was already in his sixties when, in the 1830's, he studied religious themes through the work of old master painters such as Rembrandt. Although Turner's early artistic training was formal and he was involved in the Royal Academy of Painting, London, for his entire life, his subject choices centered on landscape rather than the human form. Rembrandt's religious works forced Turner to think about the content of biblical narratives and the compositional element of painting figures, two realms that were new and somewhat uncomfortable to him. He admitted that painting figures was "not my style."<sup>†</sup>

Most scholars agree that Turner used oil paintings such as these to work out the problems associated with depicting the figure. The Tate Gallery, where the artist bequeathed it, maintains he abandoned *Christ Driving the Traders from the Temple* as unsatisfactory and never finished it. It may have been intended to accompany the paintings of Shadrach, Meshech,

and Abednego that Turner exhibited in 1832.

Turner's signature style—described by his contemporary artist and friend, John Constable, as “tinted steam”—is evident here: his loose brushwork creates a hazy effect. Individual faces, seen here and there in the composition, are not detailed in a manner to reflect emotion. Even the figure of Christ is depicted in a gesture of prophetic preaching or welcome, rather than anger in turning over tables or brandishing a whip.

The application of paint is thick and dense; a mass of yellow color at Christ's feet represents the trembling mass of “robbers” he wants out of his house. As viewers we are led to the temple from this outer courtyard by a strong diagonal light, but these human figures meld into a wall or blockade between us and the temple entrance. The religious authorities, who exploit the sincerity of the worshipers for financial gain, were a problem then as they may be now.

#### **NOTE**

† Tate Online. *www.tate.org.uk*, 22 September 2003.

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