

For Such a Time as This

'You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness and into his wonderful light' - 1 Peter 2:9 (NLT)

'God saves the world through fascination, by setting up an alternative society on the margins of empire for the world to come and see what a society of love looks like' - Shane Claiborne and Christopher Haws, from *Jesus for President*

A Matter of Concern

Once again, as happens every four years, the nation in which we live is about the business of electing a President. Politics is a messy business, and it is perhaps for this reason, among others, that church leaders choose to be silent during intense election seasons. This season, however, has led the undersigned church leaders to the conclusion that silence is simply not an option. In speaking out, we are well aware that some may be offended. But we remember the words of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.:

'There was a time when the church was very powerful. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on with the conviction that they were a 'colony of heaven,' and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too 'God-intoxicated' to be 'astronomically intimidated.'

Inspired by such words, we press on to express our views and concerns, knowing that some might become upset, but trusting that with God in our midst, we will nonetheless leave tonight having had a necessary and important discussion concerning the role of the Church in the midst of our current political and cultural climate.

We are not politicians, nor is it our intention tonight to be political in the traditional sense of the word. But we begin by acknowledging that there is no disguising the fact that part of what inspires us to speak is the tone and rhetoric of Donald Trump. We have witnessed the way he has played to the fears and prejudices of his audiences. Fear tactics and hatemongering have been common fare, and have stirred up racial, ethnic and religious bigotry. He has made irresponsible statements that encourage violence. Insults and verbal abuse have been the order of the day. Targets have included women, the disabled and just about anyone with whom he disagrees. Indecency has been the hallmark of his campaign (See, Max Lucado's Blogpost, *Decency for President*).

What makes this all the more disturbing is that Mr. Trump has projected himself as a defender and protector of Christianity. More troubling still is the fact that many professing Christians have uncritically rallied to his side, creating the false impression among non-Christians that this all somehow represents Jesus. The July meeting in New York between Mr. Trump and a group of over 900 evangelicals, which received widespread news coverage, is but one of the ways in which this impression has been made.

To be fair, both sides of the political spectrum have been problematic in this respect. There are disturbing words, actions and policy positions coming from both camps. For example, Hillary Clinton's uncompromising support of abortion (including partial birth abortion), her support for same-sex marriage, and the implications of her policy positions for both individuals and religiously-based charitable organizations (such as adoption agencies) are matters of deep concern to us. There are many Christians who have rallied to her side, without critically engaging those positions. This too, in our view, is troubling.

Having named the candidates of both political parties, we want to emphasize that it is not our purpose tonight to promote any one candidate or party over another. Neither of America's two major parties (or any other party for that matter) represents Jesus. Indeed, our concerns run much deeper than any one party or person's

candidacy. What we are most concerned with is the manner in which Christians are engaging the political process.

We are concerned that the Church has become so entangled in the political process that it has lost much of its prophetic witness. We fear that some Christians have confused their allegiance to political party or nation with their allegiance to Christ and his Kingdom; they have lost the ability to discern what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. The watching world is left to wonder whether we worship the God of the Bible or the nationalistic gods of the Republican and Democratic parties. Unable or unwilling to speak out against evil when doing so might undermine the political agenda of their party of choice, Christians on both sides of the political spectrum have remained silent in the face of actions and words that are at odds with the way of Jesus Christ. In some cases, loyalty to party or nation has resulted in Christians abandoning fidelity to Biblical teaching altogether. Thus, to name but a few examples, Christians stand by and say nothing as candidates encourage greed, selfishness, xenophobia, racism, violence, a lack of concern for the poor, disrespect for religious liberty and disregard for the sanctity of human life.

We are concerned by this state of affairs, and it leads us to ask, 'How should God's people respond?' How do we 'be the Church' in such a time as this?

Who We Are

Answering such questions begins with an understanding of who we are and what God has called us to be to the world. We do not believe that God calls his Church to run the kingdoms of the world. Jesus, when offered command of the world and its kingdoms in the wilderness, emphatically declined (See, Luke 4:5-8). So what is the role of God's people in a political world?

From the beginnings of salvation history, God has been answering that question. It essentially comes down to the oft repeated Biblically-based maxim that we are to be 'in the world, not of it' (See, 1 John 2:15; John 15:19; Romans 12:2). When God called Abraham and Sarah (then Abram and Sarai) to leave the land of the Sumerians and travel to the land that he would show them, he placed them at the very

crossroads of civilization, where the Empires of the east and west came into contact with one another. The land he gave to them, which came to be known as 'the promised land,' was the place he brought his people again hundreds of years later when he led them out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Ray Van der Laan has pointed out that in doing so, God was deliberately creating a people who would dwell in the midst of empires and live differently to show the world who God is. As it says in Deuteronomy 14:2, they were 'set apart' to be a people 'holy to the Lord.' They were to be God's 'peculiar treasures' who would show the world of empire another way to live (Exodus 19:5). They would be witnesses for God and his ways in the midst of a world that did things its own way.

The tragedy for God's people throughout the history of the Old Testament was that they were constantly kicking against the goads with respect to this calling. The temptation to 'return to Egypt,' to be like the empires around them and live as people in them did, abounds throughout the Old Testament narrative. Abraham, instead of trusting God to provide for him in a difficult time, sought refuge in Egypt (at great risk to his wife!) (See, Genesis 12:10-20). The Israelites were constantly tempted to return to Egypt in the time of the Exodus (See, Numbers 14:1-5, among many other examples). In 1 Samuel 8, this desire to be like the world of empire reached a critical point when the people asked Samuel to give them a king so that they could be like the nations (1 Samuel 8:5). Both God and Samuel gave them a king, but in doing so, made clear that they were rejecting God (8:7). Even later in their history, after the idea of having a king to rule them had proven to be nothing but trouble, God's people continued to seek power and protection from the empires of the world, rather than trusting in God and allowing him to be their King. Jeremiah and Isaiah were particularly vocal concerning the need of the people of Judah to stop relying on alliances with nations like Egypt and start relying on God. The Old Testament is clear that the people of God were meant to trust in God as their King and to live as he asked them, to be the counter-cultural witness to a world where empires reigned. But the people kept trying to be like those empires.

Flash forward to Jesus. What did everyone expect the Messiah to be? A king like the kings of the nations. A triumphant ruler who would rise up, toss out the

Romans, and establish a political, national kingdom. Jesus disappointed them at every turn. Instead of a top-down approach to things, Jesus preferred working from the bottom-up. He moved about as an itinerant Rabbi, proclaiming the Kingdom of God, demonstrating its distinctiveness from the kingdoms of the world and otherwise showing the world another way. His way was marked by the rejection of worldly power, compassion for the broken, poor and marginalized, selfless sacrifice and enemy love. Truly his was a different kind of kingdom.

Jesus gathered a group of followers (disciples), whose purpose was to spread his message, make disciples of the nations and carry on his way in the world. In the book of Acts, we see the fulfillment of God's desire to see his people living as they should - as a peculiar people living in the midst of a broken and twisted world, showing that world another way. It is very significant that the early Church called Jesus the 'Son of God.' This was the title of the Roman Emperor. The message was clear: to the community of Jesus' followers, Jesus was Lord, and Caesar was not.

Interestingly, this community that called Jesus Lord, the early Church, never sought political power. They understood that their citizenship was not in the kingdoms of the world but in the Kingdom of God; that they were, as Paul put it, 'citizens of heaven' (Philippians 3:20). They were strangers and aliens in a foreign land (See, Hebrews 11:13-16). But while they did not seek to control the political powers of the world, they did witness to them. They revealed, with both words and actions, that there was a new way to live. A new way to be human. That the way of the empires of the world was not the way to go. The way to go was to follow the way of Jesus.

In short, while they did not entangle themselves with the powers of the world (See, 2 Timothy 2:4), they provided a prophetic witness to the world that another way was possible. This is the calling of the Church. This is who we are meant to be. A peculiar people whose distinctive way of life shows the way to God. We are not to entangle ourselves in the world of politics to the extent that we forget our allegiance. We are not to capitulate to Caesar in any way, shape or form. We are to live differently and speak prophetically to the world around us, including its political

empires. And we are to do so that the world might come to know Jesus Christ and enjoy him forever.

The Church in History

Throughout history, the Church has at times both lost its way and fulfilled its mission gloriously. We choose to focus on the shining moments. We think of Athanasius prophetically standing against both a church and Empire that pressured him to embrace a Christology that would have subordinated the Church to the power of the Emperor. We think of the Anabaptists of the Reformation who refused to entangle themselves with the state, insisting instead upon a believers' church that would stand as a prophetic witness to the way of Christ. We think of the birth of the Baptist movement in the 17th century, which had similar motivations. We think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in Germany, of the prophetic voice for truth that then spoke against an empire as evil as they come. And we think of the American Baptist pastor quoted earlier, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who together with many other Kingdom oriented Christians prophetically and lovingly stood against a system that promoted and protected racial discrimination. All of these are representative of the highest ideals and calling of God's people. In each instance, the Church stood at the crossroads of empire and bore witness to God's love, compassion and justice. In each instance, the Church showed the world another way.

We need to reaffirm this identity in such a time as this. In an age when racism is rearing its ugly head, when political leaders show little respect for the ways of God, when life, both born and unborn, is deemed cheap, and when so many other evils abound, the Church needs to stand up. We need to get back to our calling. We need to be a Church that stands for truth, speaks the truth and lives the truth. We need to be the peculiar people who prophetically and lovingly challenge the powers of the world as we bear witness to the way of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom.

For Such a Time as This

We believe that there are critical moments in history when the world most desperately needs the Church to fulfill this calling. This is one of those moments. The prophetic role of the Church is vital in such a time as this.

It is vital because the world is confused. Too many quarters of the Church have succumbed to the temptation to become entangled in the business of empire. Too many political leaders claim to speak for Jesus, touting Christian credentials and enjoying the unqualified support of Christians who have compromised their witness. They and their followers are holding forth positions and saying things that are entirely at odds with the way of Christ and his peculiar kingdom. Someone needs to stand up and say, 'That's not Jesus!'

It is vital because the world needs to see the real Jesus. The world needs to come to know the real Jesus. Without Jesus, no one can inherit eternal life (John 3:16; 14:6). People are in danger of living their lives apart from God both now and forever. Bonhoeffer warned in the early 1930s that if the Church did not rediscover its calling and stand for the truth, there would be no Christian witness in Europe in 50 years. While there are still Christians in Europe, there can be no doubt the Church has lost ground on that continent. If we do not speak up now, people will get the wrong impression of who Jesus is. They will most likely reject that impression. Or, which is perhaps worse, they may embrace it. Either way, the world will not know the real Jesus. That would be a tragedy in both time and eternity.

Finally, it is vital because the rhetoric and positions of our leaders hurt people. The offenses of candidates, leaders, government and their supporters are not victimless crimes. The Church needs to be the Church to speak for those victims, to stand with those victims and to show them that there is a God who loves them; that there is a Kingdom to which they can belong.

It is vital that the Church, now, in such a time as this, fulfills its prophetic role.

What to Do?

The question is not therefore whether we need to do something. The question is: what do we do? How can we, in our communities, live as the peculiar people of

God in such a time as this? How can we live as citizens of another world in the midst of the current political climate? How can we be a prophetic witness while avoiding becoming entangled in the affairs of worldly politics? How can we be in the world but not of it?

These are hard questions. But we believe answering them begins with discussion and prayer. We would like to call pastors and church leaders together for a time of discussion, discernment and prayer. Our hope is that, together, we might find a way to let Jesus shine through his Church. Our hope is that, together, we might find a way to live as the Church of Jesus Christ in such a time as this.

For the integrity of the Kingdom,

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