



December 16, 2020

Dear Beloved of Christ,

Perhaps you will be relieved to know this letter has nothing to do with masks, yet I would be remiss if I did not thank everyone who has been worshiping with us for complying with the Session's policy. We do continue to frequently evaluate our policies to try to include more people.

This letter concerns the *other* major controversy simmering in American society, namely the social unrest, violence, and general lawlessness that has afflicted many cities recently. A pastoral letter on this topic is overdue. We live in times that are not strange to human history. Plagues were often followed or accompanied by social disorder and social upheaval. Yet while these times are strange to us, our own situation is not so very different from things our ancestors endured.

While I would have liked to address this matter earlier and talked through the implications in a more open forum, alas our "public health crisis" has not allowed that yet. Nonetheless, the Ninth Commandment, which was before us last Lord's Day, provided an excellent opportunity to think through some of the issues related to the Church's role in the present national moment.

I. RACISM IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Sadly, when we survey the history of the Church, we find many of the Lord's greatest saints stained with the sin of racism and partiality: the Apostle Peter, Martin Luther, and Robert Lewis Dabney (just to name a few). It is clear racism is a sinful disposition that not only seems to perennially afflict the Church, but yields bitter fruit generation after generation.

There is no excuse for racism of any sort. The Apostle James clearly condemns the sin of partiality, i.e. favoring one sort of person over another based on external circumstances:

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (Jas. 2:1-4)

The Apostle Paul likewise even rebuked - publicly and personally - the Apostle Peter for his racist actions that seemed to be rooted in Peter's cowardly heart:

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him... (Gal. 2:11-13)

Paul goes on to explain that such conduct is "not in step with the truth of the gospel." The Scripture clearly testifies it is sinful to allow ethnic background to influence those with whom we share in Christian fellowship. It is sinful to join a congregation simply for the sake of being around those of certain ethnic backgrounds; likewise, it is sinful to exclude people from our fellowship on such a basis.

Racism and ethnic favoritism must have no part in the Christian life. In fact, the Scripture anticipates the day in which the Church of God will reflect the diversity of mankind:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9-10)

All of this is nothing new to our congregation, I am sure. I am confident our congregation has always welcomed and served people of every sort of ethnic background.

If this is not the case, we would surely need to repent. For example, the Session of the congregation I served for five years in Mississippi had adopted a policy in 1954 that banned Black people from worshipping with the congregation. We had to address that situation even a half a century later because such a policy was sinful against God and antithetical to our gospel witness.

II. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

What role does the Church have in dealing with racist elements in the society around her or correcting the social dysfunctions in the city of her exile?

There are some who say the Church must join Jesus Christ in His mission:

He [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

They argue the mission of the Church is to follow Jesus in proclaiming the good news by freeing the socially oppressed, fighting for social justice by righting social wrongs, by serving the poor and physically disabled. If that is the mission of the Church, then we should expect our Denomination and our Presbytery and our Session of elders to frequently issue proclamations on social and political matters and call the saints to specific social and political action. But there are a number of problems with that interpretation of Jesus' mission and the assumption the Church is to take up that mission.

First, the primary focus of Jesus' public ministry was preaching (e.g. Mark 1:38, "*Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.*"). Indeed, He did feed a few people and He did restore a few physically disabled people. But Jesus did not focus His energies on righting social wrongs or speaking truth to power, but instead confronting people in spiritual bondage to lifelong slavery because of fear of death (cf. Heb. 2:15). Additionally, the only prisoners Jesus' freed were spiritual, not victims imprisoned by injustice. It is clear interpreting Jesus' mission in a primarily or chiefly social scope rather than spiritual scope fails to adequately encompass what He came to do.

Second, even if we were to accept the faulty premise of interpreting Jesus' sermon in Luke 4 as a description of *His* social mission, there is no indication the Church is to join Christ in that mission. Quite simply, there is no commission from Christ the King to His Church to free prisoners, enable the blind to see, or liberate the oppressed.

If we interpret the mission of Jesus as having a social focus on freeing prisoners, liberating the oppressed, and enabling the blind to see, we would have to conclude His mission was an abysmal failure. He healed very few blind people and he freed very few or no (Cf. John 8) actual prisoners.

However, if we understand Jesus' mission - as He summarizes it for us in Luke 4 - as primarily spiritual: freeing spiritual prisoners, liberating the spiritually oppressed, bringing good news to the spiritually impoverished, and granting spiritual eyes to the spiritually blind, then the greatness of His success cannot be *overstated*! We see that success pictured for us in Revelation as a numberless multitude (cf. Rev. 7:9-10)!

Additionally, if Jesus is speaking about His mission in spiritual terms, then there is no way the Church can join Him in *His* mission. Because only His power can make the spiritually blind see (Cf. Isa. 6:9ff), only His Spirit can raise the spiritually dead and give the condemned new life. These are divine functions, not the function of the Church; we have no power to give people spiritual eyes to see or ears to hear. But that is not to say the Church does not have a mission.

So what is the mission of the Church? Has Christ given His Church a mission? The mission of the Church is similar, but distinct from Christ's mission; it is recorded most clearly in Matt. 28:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20)

The commission the King gives to His Church is simply to make more disciples. And He tells His Church how to fulfill that task: proclaiming, teaching, preaching all the Saviour has commanded and accomplished for His people. Jesus did not tell the Church to correct social ills, to protest injustice, build hospitals, or provide a place for cultural and artistic expression. But instead the mission of the church is to declare the good news of Christ to all nations, calling people to embrace Him in faith.

That good news will transform people and as more and more people are brought to faith in Christ, societies and communities will begin to change as the Spirit enables more people to live by faith, love, and sacrifice rather than by greed, suspicion, and selfishness. As Christians grow in faith, they will inevitably band together to serve the oppressed, the poor, and those in danger or need.

We've seen this in our own congregation. Our members are concerned for the gospel to go forth and churches to be planted in places like England, Germany, and Colombia.

But our members also have been personally active in doing the good works God prepared in advance for them to walk in. In years past, members of this church have been active in rescuing potential victims of infanticide and abortion in Chattanooga. After the closure of the abortion facility locally, our members have taken up the cause of serving women through the Love's Arm ministry who are subjects of sexual bondage and victims of various forms of slavery or human trafficking.

This congregation's primary focus is the proclamation of the gospel, the good news of Christ, yet the preaching of God's word has not led the Christians here to be idle, but spurred us on to be active in deeds of love and faithfulness. Affliction, injustice, and oppression suffered by those made in God's image should trouble and motivate Christians to compassion and service. The King reminds us acts of sympathy and service to the saints are an essential part of the Christian life and done unto Him:

Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matt. 25:37-40)

III. A HOLY, PROPHETIC VOICE

Some have called for the Church to denounce racism and spend more time addressing issues of race in society from the pulpit and lectern. Many have wanted the Church to issue statements on the current racial unrest and crisis in the nation and tell the society how to fix these problems. But the trouble with such demands is they extend the Church's mission beyond what Christ has given her to do and beyond her ability to speak with expertise.

Indeed we have not avoided addressing issues of race or ethnic prejudice from the pulpit when it has arisen out of the Scripture before us each week. However, the Church is not qualified to tell, for

example, a police department precisely how to uphold the law, precisely how to subdue those who resist lawful authority, or precisely what methods to use in carrying out their duties. Similarly, we don't tell Christian parents what curricula they must use for their home schools or to which schools they may send their children. And we certainly don't tell people at which stores to buy their clothing.

While we boldly proclaim our theology of justice, rooted in God's character, the duty of Christian parents to ensure their children are instructed in the doctrines of our holy faith, and the importance of dressing in a modest and God-honoring way, our application of these principles does not prescribe precisely what must be done in all situations.

In the cases of many recent and tragic deaths of individuals in police custody or at the hands of law enforcement officers, the Session has not issued statements because that is firstly not our role to respond to every news article or tell the police how they ought to have handled a situation. Additionally, we did not do so because we rarely possess sufficient information to do so.

In many of these cases, the initial reports appeared to show outrageous conduct, and numerous American cities were set aflame as a result, but later information came to light that drastically changed our understanding of these events. The initial judgments many made were shown to be unjust.

The Ninth Commandment requires us not only to refrain from perjury, but also to refrain from damaging the good name of our neighbor unnecessarily. As such, it is our Christian duty in the Ninth Commandment to exercise patience even in the face of outrageous events to allow justice to run its course. God warns us not to spread false reports or to pervert justice (Cf. Exod. 23:1, Lev. 19:15); when we arrive at a judgment before time allows the facts to come to light, we are not obeying the Saviour's command to "*judge with right judgment*" (John 7:24).

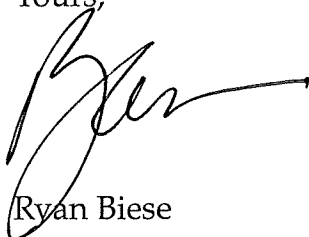
Additionally, Christians must allow our "*reasonableness to be known to everyone*" (Phil. 4:5) and part of being reasonable is patiently allowing the truth to come out and not taking to the streets or to social media to quickly denounce an individual based on only initial reports.

Christians cannot throw in with a mob calling for justice, when the mob's concept of justice is not rooted in God's truth, but corrupted by a worldly, Marxist ideology. Instead, Christians must call to repentance all those who promote or practice injustice of any sort. That is our God-given mission.

This is not to say there are no serious issues troubling the society in which we live and in great need of reform or that individual Christians should be unconcerned with such social and secular matters. But addressing those matters is beyond the mission and expertise of the Church. Christians should care about those things and Christians should go out from our churches and apply the principles of the Scripture, the grace of the gospel, and the preaching of Christ to all our activities and callings: voting, working, parenting, etc. In our meeting together, we are disciplined and strengthened to fulfill our various callings in the world as we faithfully serve Christ our King and await His return.

This is one reason why public worship, corporate worship is the most important and most necessary activity we do every week. I hope to worship with you this Lord's Day morning and evening as we worship in Word and Sacrament together.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ryan Biese', written in a cursive style.

Ryan Biese

POSTSCRIPT FROM THE SESSION

When Jesus finished reading the Scriptures, all eyes were on Him, to see what He would say and do. And now, the eyes of the world are fixed on us at First Presbyterian, to see what we will say and do as we come out of worship. When we notice the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed, will we be moved with compassion as our Savior was, seeing them as sheep without a shepherd? Will it be clear to the world that our desire is to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to them? Will we *become all things to all people*, that by all means [we] might save some (I Corinthians 9:22b)?

It is too easy to harden our hearts to people in need if we believe that they a.) do not seem to be doing enough to help themselves, b.) are being enabled by government welfare, or c.) will squander the resources offered to them. Remember, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, *seeking someone to devour.*" (I Peter 5:8) He will offer all sorts of reasons (excuses) why it makes sense to dismiss or disregard individuals or segments of society as not worthy of our concern, as deserving of being in the condition they are in.

Yet, if we truly believe that their greatest need is spiritual, we have to remind ourselves that help came to us precisely because we were unworthy and helpless. Therefore, let us pray that the Apostle Paul's perspective would rule in our hearts as we think about the mission of the church: *For the love of Christ controls us*, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their *sake died and was raised* (I Corinthians 5:14,15).

We are "those who live." Is there evidence that we "no longer live for ourselves, but for Him"? We are tempted to find fault with people whom we associate with this or that "movement," forgetting that those groups are made up of individuals---individuals who, like us, must answer to a holy God for their lives. May God cause us to see them as individuals, as the neighbors whom we are to love as we love ourselves

This is an uncomfortable conversation to have with ourselves. Not living for ourselves but for Christ is so foreign to us that we should not be surprised that it does not come automatically. But we have promises and an active Holy Spirit that cause us to pursue with hope the idea that living in that manner will become "second nature." It has to, because it certainly isn't our first nature!

You may have questions or responses to this. The Session is eager to discuss more with you on this matter so we can think on these things together as we grow in holiness together. We would love to consider more ways we as individuals, families, and groups can stir one another up to love and good works for the praise and glory of God our Father.


Your servants in Christ,



Ryan Biese



David Bosshardt



Wil Davis



Herman McConathy