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“What America Needs from Christians Today”

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Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

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Sanctuary Worship

On January 6, 2021, many watched in horror as rioters stormed the U. S. Capitol building, assaulting Capitol police and shouting threats against members of Congress. What was even more disturbing than the violent insurrection and seditious actions that day was that amongst the crowd were flags emblazoned with Christian symbols, banners quoting words from scripture, people kneeling in prayer before busting through barricades, and pastors with megaphones urging on their supporters.

On June 24, 2022, as the Dobbs decision was handed down by the U. S. Supreme Court, crowds of protestors and supporters gathered outside. Here, too, Christian symbols and quotations from scripture were employed – by both sides – with many faith leaders interspersed among the demonstrators.

A Pew research poll in 2021 revealed that 63% of Americans identify as Christian, though only about a third of them attend a church even once a month. That same survey indicated that 29% of Americans do not identify with any religion at all, a ten percent increase over the last decade.¹ That makes “nones” – those who when asked to identify their religious affiliation check the box *none* – the fastest growing segment in America’s religious landscape. Our Christian witness – or lack of it – is accelerating the church’s decline.

We are at a critical juncture in the life of the church in this country. As extremism spreads and the rhetoric of division becomes more rancorous, followers of Jesus must choose whether and how to respond. Doing nothing cedes ground to the loudest and most fanatical interpreters of our faith, leaving non-Christians with the impression that we’re either desperate crusaders in an endless culture war or completely impotent in the face of social injustice.

One of the most disturbing and dangerous developments over the past decade is the rise of Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is an ideology that “demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian. It often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation.”² In an article in *Christianity Today*, Southern Baptist ethicist David Miller condemned Christian nationalism for twisting the message of the Gospel, “taking the name of Christ as a fig leaf to cover its political program, treating the message of Jesus as a tool of political propaganda and the church as the handmaiden and cheerleader of the state.” In the toxic climate of increasing racism, exclusion, and violence, what kind of witness is most faithful and effective?

In a 2019 Pew research poll, nearly 2/3 of respondents said churches should stay out of politics.³ Tony Campolo once said that mixing religion and politics is like mixing ice cream and manure – it doesn’t do much to the manure, but it sure spoils the ice cream. And yet, to avoid the political dimensions of our faith is to overlook an essential element of the Gospel. If Christianity wasn’t political, the Roman Empire would not have bothered to execute Jesus. His kingdom was

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

² <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/11/15/americans-have-positive-views-about-religions-role-in-society-but-want-it-out-of-politics/>

not of this world, and that is precisely why he was a threat to the government and the religious establishment. His position would be no different today. To follow the way of Jesus is to proclaim Jesus is Lord – not Caesar, not the nation, not any political system or ideology.

Maybe what we mean when we say that the church shouldn't be political is that we want the church to avoid controversy. Perhaps we look to our faith primarily to bring us comfort, the reassurance that God is on our side and that, even when the world is falling apart, we're not all that bad. Take, for instance, the scripture for today and the theme of our series throughout the month of October. *Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.* We commit those words to memory, sing them in songs, print them on t-shirts and yard signs. But Micah's words weren't initially heralded as a feel-good slogan. A few chapters earlier, Micah delivers a scathing critique of the established order: *Listen up, rulers of Israel! You hate justice and twist right and wrong. You're building Jerusalem on a foundation of murder and corruption. Even your prophets won't prophesy unless you pay them.* (Put that on a bumper sticker.) This verse we love to quote calls out God's people for performing empty rituals and dodging faithful action. *Do you think God desires costly gifts, extravagant offerings, or great sacrifices to make up for your sin? No! **This** is what God requires: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*

"Who do you think you are to talk to us like that, Micah? What do you know about civic life? You're a preacher. Stick to the spiritual stuff and quit meddling." Only after the fall of Judah and decades of exile did Micah's instructions finally resonate. And we've been trying to live into them ever since.

When people say we should keep politics out of the church, I want to know which Jesus they're following. I used to address that criticism by saying Jesus was political, but he wasn't partisan. But I'm not sure that's right, either. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah more than any other scripture. Isaiah's prophecy begins with this: "Learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:17) Jesus said that we ultimately would be judged by what we do for the least of these: feeding the hungry, satisfying the thirsty, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison. Is that partisan? Maybe it doesn't take sides with one political party over another, but there's a clear directive to focus on those who are left out and left behind. We are to be on the side of the oppressed, the vulnerable, the poor, the marginalized. When people are hurting and without hope, we take sides. When people are unjustly incarcerated, we take sides. When human lives are exploited for profit, we take sides. When people are pushed aside because of the color of their skin or where they live or what they have or who they love, we take sides. When a distorted sense of history and national pride take precedent over Gospel fidelity, we take sides.

We don't choose sides by following a political party or a popular movement or even our own hearts. St. Mark the Ascetic, a fifth century Greek monk, warned, "Until you have eradicated evil, do not obey your heart; for it will seek more of what it already contains within itself."⁴ As people of faith, we don't look inward for guidance, we look upward. We look to Jesus, who demonstrated by his very life the ethics of justice, kindness, and humility. Jesus, who said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:43-44). Jesus, who began his ministry by reading from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me.

He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,

⁴ St. Mark the Ascetic. *On the Spiritual Law*. #191. (<http://www.orthodoxriver.org/static/philokalia/saint-mark-on-the-spiritual-law-two-hundred-texts/>)

to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

We look to Jesus to show us the way, striving to practice what Jesus did and what he taught. Jesus didn't turn people away; he welcomed the very people society rejected, listening to them and eating with them and being a friend to them. He didn't cozy up to those who could help him achieve an agenda; he spoke out against economic injustice, false piety, and the hypocrisy of religious authorities. He didn't strap up and lead an armed rebellion; he rejected violence and power, embracing weakness and humility all the way to the cross. What looked like defeat turned into ultimate victory, paving the way for new life and hope for all who follow in his way.

What does America need from Christians today? Given the present state of public Christian witness, I'm not sure most Americans would say they need *anything* from us. The Christian church has too often been just one more place where people retreat into camps and point fingers of blame. Not a very compelling witness.

I think people around us are tired of hearing about our disagreements and sectarian squabbles. What they want to know is if we have anything to offer that will actually make a difference. Because I believe the Gospel is still relevant, I think we *do* have something to offer. But let me first name a few things America *doesn't* need from Christians today.

America doesn't need us to take back the nation for Christ. While it may be true that many of our nation's founders created their structures based on Christian principles or ideas they drew from cultural Christianity, they intentionally did not establish the United States as a theocracy. Think of places around the world with an official state religion that mandates government policy and establishes "morals legislation." It doesn't go well. Perhaps that's because politics is about power, and power corrupts. Corruption in government is crippling. Corruption in religion – paired with political might – is deadly.

America doesn't need us to engage in culture wars. Putting prayer back in school isn't the answer. You can pray in school now; you just don't have anyone telling you when and how to pray. That's a job for parents and churches, not teachers. Carving the ten commandments above the door doesn't make anyone more likely to follow them. Banning books only limits our awareness of ideas that are already in circulation. We're capable of having more nuanced conversations about important topics than using them at litmus tests for who's in our tribe.

America doesn't need us to quote the Bible to shut down debate. The Bible is a sacred text that should be used constructively. The era of Christendom is over. We cannot assume cultural adoption of Judeo-Christian values. That doesn't mean those values aren't relevant; on the contrary, they're timeless and helpful in much of our moral deliberation, and we should be guided by them. But we need to engage people where they are, not insist everyone adopt the same reverence for our sacred texts. Bring biblical values into civil discussion, but don't use the Bible as a weapon to silence disagreement. Non-Christians aren't moved by our quotations.

What *does* America need from Christians today? Perhaps a better question is, what does God need from us to be *a more credible witness* for the Gospel in America today? People are much less interested in what we believe than what we do. So first, *we need to lead in mission.* We're either a church in mission, or we're not a church. We're surrounded by

needs that the world doesn't know how to meet. But we have a long track record of rolling up our sleeves and transforming lives. As followers of Jesus, we should look to his example: bring good news to the poor, liberate the oppressed, free those who are bound by unjust systems or despair.

We need to embody hope. People are hungry for hope. They need to know that there is a God who loves them and who cares about them. They're looking for a faith that will lead to a brighter future, not one pining for the past. We can start by remembering God's unconditional love and that we are beneficiaries of God's abundant grace. God isn't indifferent to our pain, but wants to bring healing, transforming human hearts to be compassionate and loving. And for whatever reason, God chooses imperfect humans like us to carry that witness into the world.

We need to rise to the Micah 6:8 challenge: Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. **Do justice.** Human justice is about punishment and getting what we deserve. God's justice is about reconciliation, restoration, and grace – precisely *not* what we deserve. **Love kindness.** We can model kindness, even when – especially when – we disagree with others. Division is contagious, but kindness can be, too. **Walk humbly.** We could all do with a little more humility. We don't have all the answers. We'll make plenty of mistakes; that's part of what it is to be human. But by walking humbly *with God*, we can learn and grow together.

As followers of Jesus who live in the United States, we have an important role to play. If we want the best for our country, we'll bring the best we have to offer to civic life. Let's not insist on compliance to a narrow identity, but focus our efforts on the things closest to Jesus's heart. That's a witness that's truly needed – in every time. Amen.