

“God & Caesar”

Matt. 22:21

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In recent years I have served as the Chairman of the Greater Houston Area Pastor's Roundtable. The purpose of this organization to bring pastors into regular contact with political leaders from all levels of government in the hope that what we might describe as some cross pollination might occur. In the first instance, our goal was to make the politicians more aware of and more sensitive to the concerns and perspectives of the Christian community. But also, and perhaps primarily, our intent was to inform and educate pastors on public policy issues enabling them to then encourage and motivate their people to actively participate in the political process as responsible Christian citizens. In my capacity as Chairman of this group I have had the opportunity to meet with the address pastors and politicians across the state of Texas and the South.

I am increasingly convinced that we as Lutherans have a unique and vital role to play in this ongoing dialog. Lutherans hold the Biblical middle ground in these discussions between Calvinists, on the one hand, who seek to reclaim a mythical past and rebuild America as a theocratic "Christian Nation;" and secularists on the other, who seek to exclude God and religious values from the public square altogether.

We believe that the church exists from one reason, and one reason only, to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners. Thus, to use Kurt Marquart's words, "the church, as church, has nothing to say to the state, as state." The church has no call from her Lord to proclaim a social gospel either of the left or of the right. The church, however, through her pastors, does have the responsibility to teach God's Word to her people so that they, in turn, may serve God in the Kingdom of the left as responsible citizens. God instituted worldly government to restrain evil and defend the common good.

Luther insists: "This is why God has ordained magistrates, parents, teachers, laws, shackles, and all civic ordinances, so that, if they cannot do any more they will at least bind the hands of the devil and keep him from raging at will." (LW, 26, 308) But if the devil's hands are to be bound, Christians must be willing to courageously stand for what is right and to resolutely oppose what is wrong within our culture. If Christians are to take that stand then the church and her pastors must prepare and equip them with the same courage and resolution by specifically addressing the moral issues of the day on the basis of God's Word.

Any discussion of these questions for Lutheran Christians whose historical and theological roots go back to Germany takes place under the shadow of the overall failure of German Christianity to recognize and resist the evil of Nazism. In a recent book entitled *Hitler's Cross*, Erwin Lutzer contends:

"The church has always been poised between two gods and two crosses. On the one side is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who died on a Roman cross, executed for the sins of the world. On the other side are any number of lesser gods, and with them other crosses -

those promises of deliverance that offer a false salvation. Yes, we also face the temptation of bowing down before the temporal gods that entice us to combine Christ with other religions, Christ and a political agenda, Christ and worldly pursuits. The experience of the church in Nazi Germany reminds us that Christ must always stand alone; he must be worshipped not as one who stands alongside the governmental leaders of this world, but as standing above them as King of kings and Lord of lords...We will discover that the Nazi era shouts its lessons to the church of America. It warns us, challenges us, and forecasts what might happen in the days ahead." (Lutzer, p.13)

The shadow of Nazi tyranny was darkening over Germany in 1933. In August of that year, a group of young confessional theologians under the leadership of Herman Sasse and Dietrich Bonhoeffer gathered at Bethel in Westphalia to formulate a theological response to the so-called "German Christians," and their attempt to refashion Christianity in the image of Nazi ideology. The result of their collaboration is called the "Bethel Confession." It provides an outstanding summary of the Lutheran doctrine of the church in its relationship to the state.

The confession categorically rejects the heresy "in whatever form it might appear, that Christ also bears witness to Himself without the Scriptures and outside them, and that the Holy Spirit is also given without the "external Word" of preaching founded upon Scripture and without the Sacrament." The went on to contend that the church has been given the task of showing the secular authority "the limits of their own order... by means of the appropriate proclamation, so that they did not become a tool of the devil...who in the end seeks only disorder, that he may thus destroy all life...With this service the church preserves those under authority from the deceit of the devil who wants an unlimited authority to have himself worshipped as lifegiver and savior." (Scholder, p. 457) The validity of their concerns became increasingly clear in the months that followed.

In 1934, during his second year as chancellor of the German Reich, Adolf Hitler invited the leaders of the evangelical churches of Germany to a meeting in Berlin. He goal was to quell mounting criticism from the Christian community of the Nazi regime and its attempts to subvert the churches. Among those present at that meeting was a fiery young Lutheran pastor from the Berlin suburb of Dahlem named Martin Niemoller. Niemoller would later recall this encounter as the moment from which he knew that Germany was doomed. Hitler was amiable and deliberately reassuring as he sought the support of these prominent churchmen. He promised the pastors that the position of the church in Germany was safe and secure - that its legal protections, its tax exemptions, and state support would remain unchanged under the Nazi government. Niemoller pushed to the front of the group to confront the chancellor directly and reject his casual consignment of Christians to social irrelevance. Standing face to face with Germany's ruler, the brash young pastor asserted: "Our concern, Herr Hitler, is not for the church. Our concern is for the soul of our country." An embarrassed silence followed his remark and it was immediately evident that Niemoller spoke only for himself. His chagrined colleagues quickly shuffled him away from the front of the room. Noting their timid reaction, the dictator smiled as he replied, "The soul of Germany, you can leave that to me."

And so they did - most Christians looked the other way while innocent people were slaughtered and a nation was led down the path to destruction. I would submit to you this evening that we

find ourselves in a similar predicament today. Once again the innocents are being slaughtered, the country is being led down the path to destruction, and Christians, by and large, are looking the other way.

America finds itself today in the midst of a moral catastrophe. We have cast aside the most basic standards of human decency. We have broken marriages and fractured families. Our youth are losing their way and often their lives in a maze of alcohol and drugs. We live in the midst of a culture that mistakes lust for love and tolerates the vilest perversions as acceptable alternate lifestyles while pestilence stalks the land. Our public schools have become facilitators for fornication and procurers for the abortionists knife. America has sown the wind of immorality and we are reaping the whirlwind of destruction and death. We have degenerated into a nation rolling in luxury, reveling in excess, rollicking in pleasure, revolting in morals, and rotting in sin. Personal responsibility, duty and honor have been abandoned in our mindless pursuit of instant gratification for our every desire.

And where have the church and her pastors been while all this was going on? Well, we've been busy - filling our pews, meeting our budgets, and building our buildings. We've been busy ministering to people's felt needs, keeping everybody happy, avoiding controversy and maintaining institutional harmony while America has been going to hell all around us. We have consigned ourselves to social irrelevance.

American Christians have become moral chameleons who can blend in anywhere and tolerate everything as long as we are left alone. The institutional church and many of its people have settled for what Francis Schaeffer called "the two impoverished values of personal peace and affluence." That is to say, as long as I am free to do whatever I want to do and have the money to buy the things that make me happy, I don't care about anything else. We've been busy looking the other way, pretending we didn't see what was happening to our families, our neighborhoods, our cities, and our country. Listen carefully to this scathing denunciation of the church's failure:

"The church must confess that she has not proclaimed often or clearly enough her message of the one God who has revealed Himself for all time in Jesus Christ and who will tolerate no other gods beside Himself. She must confess her timidity, her evasiveness, her dangerous concessions...She was silent when she should have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven...She has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of the lord Jesus Christ...The church must confess that she has desired security, peace and quiet, possessions and honor...She has not borne witness to the truth of God...By her own silence she has rendered herself guilty of a failure to accept responsibility and to bravely defend a just cause. She has been unwilling to suffer for what she knows to be right. Thus the church is guilty of becoming a traitor to the Lordship of Christ." (Bonhoeffer, Ethics, p.117)

That description fits us to a "T." But those words weren't written about American Christianity in 1996. They were written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1940 as a damning indictment of the failure of German Christianity to resist the evils of Nazism. When he wrote them, Germany was at the height of her power and prosperity. Her gross national product higher than ever before - her

armies victorious everywhere. The Jews were disappearing one by one, shipped off for "resettlement in the East." But for most people times were very good. Most German Christians did then what we are doing now - they looked the other way and minded their own business. They kept their politics and their religion strictly separate from one another and their country was destroyed. They ignored the appeals of Bonhoeffer and others like him, spurning them as one issue extremists, and pretended that everything was just fine until it was too late. Five years later Bonhoeffer was dead, hung naked from a piano wire noose at Flossenburg Concentration Camp, and the great cities and churches of Germany lay in ruins. "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is an offense to any people." (Proverbs 14:34)

Bonhoeffer had contended that the issue was one of Lordship and so it is. We have allowed the world to convince us that Jesus and His Gospel can be safely confined to Sunday mornings and compartmentalized into one small segment of our lives. But that is a lie from the father of lies. The Lord whom we serve is either Lord of all or he is not Lord at all.

The Christian who participates in the political process as a voter, a candidate, or an office holder does not cease to be a Christian. He has not received some sort of special exemption that enables him to leave the Lord Jesus outside the polling place or the door to his office like an unneeded umbrella. Many of our political leaders take pride these days in declaring that their personal moral convictions as Christians will have nothing whatsoever to do with the performance of their public duties. They evidently think that we should be reassured to know that those who control our government are self acknowledged hypocrites.

The Christians of America must not keep silent while innocent blood is shed and the nation is led to destruction. There is just too much at stake.

There are, of course a great many issues under debate in the political arena about which the church should have nothing to say. If you as a pastor are going to address a particular issue you had better be absolutely certain that you are speaking for God on the basis of His Word. The church of Jesus Christ cannot allow itself to become a sanctimonious shill for a political candidate, party, or philosophy. God is not an American, much less a Republican or Democrat. God endorses no particular form of government. He is not a conservative nor is He a liberal. Christians may hold a variety of positions on taxation, world trade, defense, and so forth. But of this one thing we can be certain - the murder of unborn children is an intolerable abomination in the eyes of the Lord. God hates abortion.

Abortion is the great moral question of our day. There is no other issue like it - it cuts to the very soul of our nation. A society that sanctions the slaughter of unborn children is a society that has reverted to barbarism. A civilization that permits the extermination of human beings because of their age, their location, or their race has forfeited the right to be called civilized. On this single issue there is only one Christian position - for life! On this single issue there is only one human position - for life! We can win the next election or the next ten elections, balance the budget, eliminate the deficit, and reduce taxes. We can make the United States the most powerful and the wealthiest country on the face of the earth. But if we do not stop the slaughter of unborn children in this land, then America will be destroyed. Abortion is an unholy altar which we have raised up to pagan gods of our own lust and greed. The blood of more than thirty million innocents has

already stained that altar. 4,500 more die every day while the Christians of this land go on about their business.

In September of 1935 the Confessing wing of the Protestant Church in Prussia met in the city of Steglitz. Frau Marga Meusel, Chairman of the Evangelical Welfare Service in the Berlin Zehlendorf District, along with Bonhoeffer and a few others, urged that the persecution of the Jews under the increasingly restrictive Nuremberg Laws be placed on the Synod's agenda. The majority, even here within the Confessing Church, refused fearing that the issue of anti-Semitism would be too divisive. Meusel condemned that decision in a bitter memorandum to the pastors of the Confessing Church with these dire words of accusation and warning:

"What should one reply to the desperate and bitter questions and accusations? Why does the church do nothing? Why does it allow unspeakable injustice to occur?...What shall we one day answer to the question, where is thy brother Abel? The only answer that will be left to us, as well as to the Confessing Church, is the answer of Cain." (Goldhagen, p.438)

When the question comes to us, my brothers in the office of the holy ministry, and to the people of our congregations, what will our answer be? For twenty-three long years the killing has continued and we are no closer today to stopping this dreadful holocaust than we have ever been. The blood of thirty-four million unborn children cries out to God for vengeance from the ground of America. "Am I my brother's keeper?" the murder replied. Are those tragic words of denial the only answer left to us?

What is our responsibility in the midst of the cultural chaos and moral collapse in which we live? It is simply this, to be what God has called us to be - pastors to His people, shepherds of His flock. We are called to preach the Word and to administer the Holy Sacraments. We are called to confess the truth of God over against the malignant evil of these last days. While others seek accommodation and compromise with the spirit of the age we are called to be faithful. That faithfulness requires that we identify and challenge the false gods of this world who would entice our people to bow down before them. We address these issues not as social reformers or political agitators but as pastors of the Lord Jesus Christ on the basis of His Word for love of His people.

Among the names included on the honor roll of Christian saints and martyrs who resolutely opposed the evil of Nazism is one such faithful pastor. He is not as well known as the flamboyant Niemoller or the brilliant Bonhoeffer. He never participated in a political movement or joined an anti-government conspiracy. He spent the years of his ministry consigned to the obscurity of small country congregations in central Germany. Pastor Paul Schneider went on about his parish duties, preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, and comforting the sick and the dying while his country was engulfed by evil. As a faithful shepherd he warned his flock of the danger which threatened. On Septuagesima Sunday, January 28, 1934, Schneider preached to his congregation at Hochelheim on Matthew 8:23-27 - Jesus stilling the storm.

"Dear congregation in the last months no thinking, attentive Christian has failed to notice that in our Evangelical Church we are being summoned to battle, to witness, to confession...To be sure many still sleep...But we can no longer close our eyes to the high towering waves which we see rolling in from our "folk-life" in the Third Reich. What is

being put together...under the leadership of influential National Socialists is naked paganism which cannot agree with the Christian faith...Now you are summoned to confession, to witness, dear Evangelical Church, dear Evangelical Church. Now do not be dumb dogs, for your Savior says: 'Only the one who confesses me before men will I also confess before my heavenly Father.' Now you are tossed about, you Christian in your church, by waves which raise themselves against you from the church, from the people, and from the state. And we are anxious, we are afraid. For us it is like the dear disciples on the sea. We call out, 'Lord! Help us! We are perishing'...What is it, however, which you alone must do to experience Jesus' splendor in the storm around the church, in the storm around your own Christian life? You should believe, trust in, and rely on, the miraculous power of the Lord, in whom you want to believe. But if you do not believe then don't say that you are a Christian, for you are only a Name-Christian, a Head-Christian, or a Hypocrite-Christian." (Wentorf p. 50, 89)

A short time later, Schneider was arrested, after announcing his intention, with the support of the Board of Elders, to place four leading Nazis from his parish under church discipline and ban them from Holy Communion. He was sent to the Concentration Camp at Buchenwald, near Weimar, where he survived a little more than 18 months. While in the camp he continued to function as a pastor, conducting improvised services, teaching from the Scriptures he had committed to memory, and ministering to his fellow prisoners. Buchenwald was the camp in which many of the Nazi regime's leftist enemies, socialists and communists, were incarcerated. These men were atheists, avowed enemies of the Christian faith.

Nonetheless, Paul Schneider's humble demonstration of Christlike love had such an impact on these men that he is known to history as "the Witness of Buchenwald." In the daily "Appell" (roll call) he consistently refused to remove his cap and salute the Nazi flag with its twisted cross, and so was repeatedly beaten, tortured, and isolated in solitary confinement. He died on July 18th, 1939, and his body was sent home in a sealed casket guarded by Gestapo agents. On the day of his burial, the entire congregation gathered to bid farewell to their beloved pastor. As the funeral procession left the church, led by 200 Evangelical pastors from across Germany, the stirring sound of Philip Nicolai's great chorale "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" (Wake, Awake, For Night is Flying) reverberated through the village.

*Now let all the heavens adore Thee, let men and angels sing before Thee,
With harp and cymbal's clearest tone. Of one pearl each shining portal, Where dwelling with the
choir immortal, we gather round Thy radiant throne.
No vision ever brought, no ear hath ever caught, such great glory;
Therefore will we, eternally sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee.*

As the procession passed the Roman Catholic Church, the priest emerged followed by his congregation to join the triumphal march to the place of burial. The Gestapo unit sent to watch over the funeral ceremony was intimidated and unnerved by the size and intensity of the crowd. At the graveside, the agent in charge remarked to one of the pastors: "This is the way kings are buried!" The pastor replied: "Hardly! What is happening here is that a blood witness of Jesus Christ is borne to the grave."

May our lives and ministries be blessed by our gracious God so that we too may be faithful witnesses to Him and His Word.