

## Reclaiming Jesus



1 Corinthians 2:1 "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

The Most Reverend Michael Curry, the former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, now retired, famously preached

at the Royal Wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, and who won praises from both the New York Times and the Washington Post for his appearance there. A few years ago, he signed a declaration with 23 other church leaders across the country entitled "Reclaiming Jesus." Those who originally signed onto this declaration did so only on the basis of their friendship with one another, and not as the formal representation of their church bodies. They were all elders of the Christian Church, all in their sixties or seventies, and all are either current or former heads of churches or major church organizations. Over time, however, many other Christian leaders asked to join the statement, and to sign their names on as well to the declaration of Reclaiming Jesus. Indeed, I signed onto the declaration a few years ago myself, and I wish to reaffirm and reiterate it now. In the words of Martin Luther, "Here I stand."

The declaration begins, "We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of (our) faith are now at stake."

The authors then go on to say that "it is time (for us) to be followers of Jesus before anything else," ----- before nationality, for example, for we are followers of Jesus first, and Americans only second; before any political party, for we

are followers of Jesus first, and Republicans or Democrats or whatever else second; before race, before ethnicity, or gender, or geography – “our identity in Christ precedes every other identity” we have. We are reclaiming Jesus as our Lord. “That is our foundational confession. It was central for the early church and needs to again become central to us today.” This is about Jesus, not anyone else. This is not about the Church, or our denominations, or our particular formulations of faith or practice, or any politician or any political party. This is about Jesus. And thus, they wrote, “We pray that our nation will see Jesus’ words in us and in our actions. For ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,’ Jesus said, ‘if you have love for one another’” (John 13:35).

The declaration then goes on with 6 very simple Affirmations, 6 declarations that we believe are fundamental to our belief as followers of Jesus --- but each one of these affirmations also then includes resulting rejections of practices and policies which we as followers of Jesus believe “corrode the soul of the nation and deeply threatens the public integrity of our faith.”

For example, the first Affirmation is that “each human being is made in God’s image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26). That image and likeness confers then a divinely decreed dignity, worth, and God-given equality to all of us, as children of the

one God who is the Creator of all things. Therefore, we reject the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on any fronts, including at the highest levels of our government and of our churches.

The second Affirmation is that we, as followers of Jesus, are one body. In the Body of Christ, Paul wrote (Galatians 3.28), "there is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female'" There is to be no oppression (then) based on race, gender, identity, or class. The Body of Christ (is the place) where those great human divisions are supposed to be overcome, (and) is meant then to be an example for the rest of society about how we are to live with one another and get along. Therefore, for example, we reject misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women that has been further revealed in our culture and politics today, including in our churches, and also the oppression of the stranger or foreigner in our midst. We lament when such practices seem publicly ignored, and thus privately condoned, by those in high positions of church leadership and our government. We stand for the respect, protection, and affirmation of women and immigrants and refugees in our families, our communities, workplaces, politics, and churches. We support the courageous truth-telling voices, who have helped the nation recognize these abuses. We confess

sexism and xenophobia as a sin, requiring our repentance and resistance.

Thirdly, we affirm that how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is a reflection of how we treat Christ himself (Matthew 25:31-46). "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it unto me," Jesus said. Therefore, we reject the language and policies of political and religious leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable among us. We strongly deplore the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees and the poor, who are being made into (convenient) cultural and political targets, and we need to remind our churches that God makes the treatment of the "alien or stranger who resides" amongst us, a test of faith (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Fourthly, we believe that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Truth-telling is vital to the ancient prophetic biblical tradition, whose vocation was to bravely declare the Word of God in their communities and to speak truth to power in the public square. A commitment to speaking truth, the ninth commandment of the Decalogue, "You shall not bear false witness" (Exodus 20:16), is foundational to a shared trust in (our) society. Therefore, we reject the practice and pattern of lying and spinning the truth that is invading our political

and civil life. Politicians and religious leaders, like the rest of us, are human, fallible, sinful, and mortal. But when public lying becomes so persistent that it deliberately tries to change facts for ideological, political, or personal gain, the public accountability to truth is undermined.

Fifthly, we believe that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination. Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the world lord it over others, and their great ones are tyrants over them. (But) It will not be so among you; ~~but~~ (for) whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:25-26). We believe our elected and religious officials are called then to public service. Therefore, we reject any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian religious rule. Thus, disrespect for the common rule of law is of great concern to us. Neglecting the ethic of public service and accountability in favor of personal recognition and personal gain, are not just political issues for us. They raise deeper concerns about political and religious idolatry.

Finally, we remember that Jesus commanded us to go into all the world making disciples (Matthew 28:18). Our churches and our nations are part of an international body, whose interests always surpass national boundaries. Therefore, we reject "America first" as a theological heresy for the followers of

Jesus. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation or religion or ethnicity over others as a political or religious goal. We (also) reject domination rather than stewardship of the earth's resources, resources that are given for all of God's children. Serving our own communities is essential, but the global connections between us are undeniable. We are, in the end then, citizens of the same world, and another kingdom, the kingdom of God, to which we all belong. Therefore, global poverty, environmental damage, violent conflicts, weapons of mass destruction, and deadly diseases ultimately affect us all, and we need wise political and religious leadership to deal with each of these.

The present crisis calls all of us to go deeper in our relationship to God; deeper in our relationships with our neighbors, especially across racial, ethnic, denominational, and national lines; deeper in our relationships with the most vulnerable in our communities, like the poor and the needy, the orphan and widow, the refugee and the stranger. We believe it is time to speak up and to act in faith and good conscience, not because of politics, but because we are followers of Jesus. It is time for a fresh restatement of our faith, reclaiming Jesus as our Master. He is the Way, the Truth, the Life, we believe.

Bishop Curry and over 1,000 others who first signed onto this declaration gathered for a candlelight Vigil at the White House, the seat of our government. It was no coincidence that church leaders planned their trip to Washington to coincide with Pentecost, a time when the first followers of Jesus took their faith to the streets and to the public square. Throughout our American history, our religious communities have and should engage politically on the issues of their time: from the Declaration of Independence to the abolition of slavery to the civil rights movements to immigration reform to the Green Revolution, and on, and so we must continue to do so today, I believe, as Christians, as followers of Jesus. It is not about partisanship, it is about politics, because politics is about how we want to order our common life together. Jesus exemplified a lifestyle then that we need to embrace, and that should then be reflected in our words and actions. Amen.