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Pastors and Life in the Public Square

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any of my Christian friends identify themselves as social conservatives and promote their chosen political organization. I also care about issues and politics, and believe we should be informed, engage in the issues that impact human life, and vote. Christians should change their world. But when pressed by some who are the most fervent in their political alignment, I suggest that keeping faith means we follow Jesus’ example of active concern for human well-being without allowing political organizations to form our worldview. After all, Jesus acted out of a worldview formed through a relationship with God, not the arguments of political organizations or the pronouncements of religious communities endeavoring to serve partisan interests.

Understanding the worldview of Jesus requires that we first note His concern for the well-being of society. Asked for instruction on how to pray, Jesus articulated the Lord’s Prayer, a model that has found a place in the liturgy of the church as much for its rhythmic formulation as its piercing content. The invocation within the third line of His prayer challenges thoughtful Christians regarding their social responsibility: “‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’” (Matt. 6:10, NKJV). Seeking the dominion of God in the present, the prayer resembles the literary structure and invocation of the Qaddish, an ancient Aramaic prayer generally used to conclude the synagogue service. As a Jew of the first century, Jesus had likely often recited the Qaddish, which says, “Exalted and hallowed be his great name in the world which he created according to his will. May he let his kingdom rule in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon.”*

Jesus’ reinterpretation was controversial. Offered in a context of oppression, slavery, injustice, inequality, abuse, and indifference, Jesus’ words “Your will be done on earth” present a radical petition. For Israel in the time of Christ, to offer that God’s will be done on earth could be interpreted to mean the overthrow of oppressive and ungodly Roman rule. Messianic hopes were entangled with political dominion, and He could have been easily understood to advocate political solutions. However, Jesus intentionally removes the national identity of Israel in the Qaddish and, instead, appeals to the will of God throughout the entire earth, inclusive of all nations and peoples.

What did Jesus mean? And why was Jesus asked by His followers how to pray? First-century Jewish life was filled with prayer. People of Jewish faith, like Jesus and His disciples, had morning and evening prayers, recited psalms as prayers, recognized the temple as a place of prayer, and recited prayers in the synagogue. What need was there for a new pattern of prayer? The answer is partly that, as disciples, they expected instruction in prayer. But it was also Jesus’ intention to reinterpret the community of faith through prayer. Jesus addressed what was most important to God in the community, and sought to embed these values within His disciples. What He meant is affirmed in His subsequent living.

**Jesus demonstrated social compassion**

The will of God on earth invites reflection regarding service to others. A pastoral theology guiding the church’s engagement with human need in society begins with the experience of Jesus. Though given a relatively short time for mission, He demonstrated social compassion throughout His ministry. He did not ignore suffering in the present in deference to His eschatological purpose. The following five such demonstrations of social concern provide insight into both His worldview and His activism.

**Jesus advocated for children.** When children were brought to Him, He affirmed their importance. “‘Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven’” (Matt. 19:14, NKJV). In a culture that offered only selective education to children, He said, “‘And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward’” (Matt. 10:42, NKJV). On at least two occasions, He taught that service...
to a child was service to Him. For Jesus, the business of the kingdom was not antithetical to worry for the education, protection, and welfare of children.

*Jesus promoted health and healing.* “When the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them” (Luke 4:40, NKJV). The sick were subsequently empowering of this woman’s ministry was a remarkable contrast to the inequalities woven throughout the cultural experience of His time. And Jesus’ disciples, launching the first-century church, knew well the will of God on earth for equality. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, NKJV).

**Jesus helped the poor.** Forsaking His livelihood for the ministry, He had no riches to share. But those in poverty received His respect. The gift of a poor widow was extolled as an evidence of great character (Luke 21:3, 4). He preached salvation to the poor (Matt. 21:3; 4). He preached salvation to the poor (Matt. 20:25, 26, NKJV). Jesus faced this temptation when His disciples reasoned that His powers to relieve disease and feed the hungry would advance national interests. “Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone” (John 6:15).

**Jesus sought justice.** Presented with a woman accused of acts demanding death in Jewish law, Jesus confronted the nature of both the judgment and the accusers: “ ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first’ ” (John 8:7, NKJV). In one act, Jesus defended the defenseless, advocated justice for all, and linked redemption to justice. When He cleared the temple of those who transformed the public place for prayer to a marketplace, He expressed His concern for universal rights (all ought to have access) without regard to power or position.

**Jesus, righteousness, and political structures**

If “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” means human society should be governed by theistic law in order to establish religious norms, it is not apparent in Jesus’ life and teaching. He did seek change in the here and now. He advocated for children, promoted universal health and healing, demonstrated His belief in equality, helped the poor, and sought justice; all moral causes reflecting righteousness in society, but He largely declined the power of ruling authority to accomplish these ends. Jesus knew of the stain of humanity and the abuse of power that inevitably accompanies structures in human society, be they political or religious.

**Ambition corrupts.** Jesus warned those who would form the framework of the early Christian church of their own temptations to power: “ ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant’ ” (Matt. 20:25, 26, NKJV).
shunned public action. You have to look no further than His sermon on the mount to note His advocacy and activism, positioned by Matthew as the climax of His early ministry. The sermon indeed identifies Jesus to Matthew’s readers. The genealogy, birth, announcement of John the Baptist, healing, all contribute to the growing popularity of His ministry. Jesus is launching a movement accompanied by mounting interest. “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. Then His fame went throughout all Syria. . . . Great multitudes followed Him” (Matt. 4:23–25, NKJV).

Then comes the sermon. With remarkable courage He overtures the hierarchal ideas of both the political empire of the Romans and religious elite of the Jewish world. The truly blessed are not the elite and powerful, but the common people, the poor, meek, persecuted, and peacemakers. It is their kingdom, not organized from the top down, but empowered among the least.

Not lacking for clarity, Jesus corrects the superficiality of technical approaches to the law while ignoring its spirit. He envisions a pluralistic society disinterestedly, positioned by Matthew as a vision for a righteous world? No. The education, protection, and rights of all children; health care for everyone; equality; relieving poverty; and assuring justice should be the interests of our society and its governing institutions. Clergy, like so many in the past have, should advocate and sacrifice for the public good. Our public institutions are vital and can serve humanity. But those interests are necessarily pursued in a pluralistic society disinterestedly, without preference, bias, or interest in matters of faith.

Christians, especially clergy, should use their influence positively in public life. Act compassionately, and support the issues that reflect Jesus’ concern for all people. Take positions on critical issues. Seek righteousness in society like so many have before us. Encourage people to exercise their civic duties responsibly. Serve the community. But remember that Jesus never used political power to enforce religious beliefs. Be certain your heart and mind are under the control of Christ, not political institutions. We are serving in His name. 

Doing as Jesus did

How then should we who follow Jesus keep faith in a political world?

The first observation is our calling to serve others without reference to religious belief. Issues like the education, protection, and rights of all children; health care for everyone; equality; relieving poverty; and assuring justice should be integrated within our Christian worldview simply because we are followers of Christ.

The second observation is the risk of assigning responsibility for behaviors rooted in religious beliefs to political structures. Many of us readily note the inherent dangers of theistic societies where government and religion have merged and the population welcomes government enforcement of religious institutions. However, democracies are also subject to righteous and unrighteous preferences of their religious majorities. When people resort to political influence to enforce religious viewpoints in matters of culture, they, without intention, misrepresent the worldview of Jesus, and the nature of God. God grants and honors the freedom of choice. Political organizations inevitably seize on specific issues in the interest of political expediency while ignoring other important issues. Clergy should preserve a prophetic voice calling society to righteousness without the bias inherent within political and religious institutions.

Does that mean our political structures always ignore, or should ignore, a vision for a righteous world? No. The education, protection, and rights of all children; health care for everyone; equality; relieving poverty; and assuring justice should be the interests of our society and its governing institutions.