

TIRED FEET, RESTED SOULS

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE POLITICAL WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.

MOTHER POLLARD

Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

GALATIANS 4:16

On April 12, 1963, eight clergy—two Methodist bishops, two Episcopal bishops, one Roman Catholic Bishop, a Rabbi, a Presbyterian, and a Baptist—wrote a letter addressed to the citizens of Alabama. This was their second such proclamation. Their first, written nearly three months earlier on January 16, was named “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense.” It called for an end to violence surrounding civil rights protests in Alabama and implored those on both sides of the divide regarding the civil rights of African Americans to trust the court system. Although it said that [p 48](#) “every human being is created in the image of God and is entitled to respect as a fellow human being with all basic rights, privileges, and responsibilities which belong to humanity,” it made no strong stand against segregation. It was the epitome of moderation.

Some three months later this group of eight composed another letter. This one contained a not-so-veiled criticism of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) whom they characterized as “outsider agitators” whose actions did not further the cause of peace. They questioned the efficacy of the political witness of Rev. Dr. King and others. They pointed out the fact that “such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.”²² This criticism of King’s actions and the Black Christian tradition of protest that undergirded it came from something of a white southern ecumenical consensus. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Episcopalians, and Jewish leaders opposed King.

What we know as the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” comes as a response not just to eight clergy but to a certain approach to religion (Christianity) that was focused more on

law and order than the demands of the gospel. In his reply to these eight clergy, where he explains his reasons for being in Birmingham, King said,

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century b.c. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and [p 49](#) just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Nearly sixty years after the publication of this letter, the debate around the role of the church in the public square continues. Was King’s mission to end segregation and create a just society at all analogous to the work of Paul and the prophets or was it merely partisan politics? Was his public and consistent criticism of the political power structure of his day an element of his pastoral ministry or a distraction from it?

For many Black Christians the answer to this question is self-evident. We have never had the luxury of separating our faith from political action. Due to the era into which it was born, the Black church found it necessary to protest a policy put in place by the state: slavery. When Frederick Douglass asked his famous question, “What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” he didn’t simply ask a question about the *United States of America*. He asked a question about *American Christianity*. He said:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; *your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, p 50 and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.*

By highlighting the hypocrisy of religious celebrations of freedom while enslaving others, Douglass called upon American Christians to live out their faith by establishing a truly equal and free society. He argued that this country could make no claim to any form of greatness until she faced what she has done to Black and Brown bodies.

Does the Bible support Douglass’ and Rev. Dr. King’s assertions? More pointedly, what does the New Testament have to say about the political witness of the church in response to the oppressive tendencies of the state?

This chapter begins with a criticism and then moves on to the testimonies of Jesus, Paul, and John. My point in this first section is plain enough. I want to show that if our

whole political theology is built on faulty readings of 1 Timothy 2:1–4 and Romans 13:1–7, then we are doing a disservice to New Testament evidence of political criticism and protest. After this deconstructive work, I will move on to consider Jesus’ discussion of Herod (Lk 13:32), Paul’s dismissal of the entire social and political order (Gal 1:4), and John’s depiction of Rome (Rev 18). I will close by calling Jesus back to the stage to speak to us about peacemaking (Mt 5:9). We will see that the enslaved and their descendants who took up the work of political action were tapping into an important element of the New Testament witness.

PRAYER, SUBMISSION, AND THE TEXTS WE CENTER

Many popular political theologies of the New Testament begin with Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Timothy 2:1–4. Centering these texts leaves p 51 Christians with the following duties: (1) submit to the state, (2) pay your taxes, and (3) pray for those in leadership. None of these three duties are in themselves wrong. They are simply limited in scope.

In an American context, the often-unstated belief in our corporate wisdom and goodness undergirds the call to submit to the government and pray. Many believe that given time and space, our government will eventually opt for the good, the just, and the true. Patience (also a Christian virtue) is urged while we fix whatever is broken. We see this belief in our goodness and the call to patience in the letter addressed to Rev. Dr. King that we mentioned above.

African American Christians who suffer and die while we are told to be patient are allowed to wonder what motivates our fellow Christians to begin with these passages. We are also allowed to ask whether 1 Timothy 2:1–4 and Romans 13:1–7, when read together and against Black protest for freedom, are being used to distort the message of the New Testament. As we stated earlier, the question is not the authority of the texts under consideration. Instead we wonder about how they are weaponized in debates about the political witness of the church.

Now is not the time to litigate Romans 13 again. I have already argued that (1) problems that many have with Romans 13:1–2 are more about theodicy than rulers; (2) Romans 9:16 and the wider Old Testament witnesses give us examples of God using *humans* to take down corrupt regimes; and therefore (3) Romans 13:1–7 should be read as a testimony to our inability to discern when God’s judgment will arrive. This does not mean that a Christian cannot protest injustice, it means that we cannot claim God’s justification for violent revolution. Submission and acquiescence are two different things.

p 52 But what about 1 Timothy 2:1–4? Doesn’t it command us to pray for our rulers? The problem here again is not the call to pray, but its interpretation within a context dedicated to limited Black political expression. 1 Timothy 2:1–4 reads,

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Two things are evident here. Paul’s concern is that we pray for all people, not just kings and rulers. The reason we are called to pray is so that we can go about the work of being the people of God without being harassed. Since rulers and kings have much to say about the quality of our lives, we pray that they would give us the space we need to do our work.⁸ Black Christians have no problem praying for freedom to pursue the mission of the church unhindered. The question before us is precisely what to do when those in authority stand in the way of us living as free Christians.

The popular misconception that Christians are called to pray and not to speak plainly about contemporary concerns fails to take seriously Paul’s own testimony in 1 Timothy about injustice. A quick glance back at chapter one will reveal that Paul makes a not so subtle jab at the practices and laws of Rome.

In 1 Timothy 1:8–11 Paul argues that the law was not put in place for the righteous, but the ungodly. His point is that the law prescribes p 53 punishments for wicked, not those obedient to their creator. He then lays out the kinds of ungodliness that the Old Testament law condemns. One of the groups that he singles out are the *andrapodistais*, the slave traders. He groups these slave traders in a category of those who are “contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Tim 1:10). When Paul refers to sound doctrine (*didaskalia*) he has in mind the received teaching of Christians everywhere.

For Paul, then, slave trading is a *theological error* to be shunned by Christians. I am not an expert on Roman slave law, but I am quite sure that there are no laws against slave trading. In fact, slave trading was seen as a good way to make money. Therefore, in the passage immediately preceding Paul’s call to pray for leaders he critiques an established practice of the empire as wicked and indicative of ungodly behavior. Prayer for leaders and criticism of their practices are not mutually exclusive ideas. Both have biblical warrant in the same letter.

The purpose of this section has not been to criticize prayer. As an Anglican clergyperson, I pray for our leaders as a part of our weekly Sunday liturgy and my daily private devotions. The goal has been to highlight the problems that occur when this is seen as the totality of our testimony. Now I move on to the more positive examples of public engagement and criticism of rulers in the New Testament beginning with Jesus himself.

p 54 THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS TO POLITICAL RESISTANCE

On one level, we can look at the entirety of Jesus’ ministry as an act of political resistance. Luke 1–2 clearly places the

birth of Jesus in the context of the reigns of Augustus on one hand and Herod on the other. This placement raises the question of who is the true king of Israel and the world. The Gospels go on to argue that, despite all appearances, the true king with all authority is Jesus (Mt 28:18–20). My focus will not be on Jesus' ministry as a whole. I simply want to explore the implications of his description of Herod during an interaction with Pharisees.

The scene is brief, but full of meaning. The Pharisees, who throughout Luke's narrative grow more and more suspicious of Jesus' work, warn him to leave the area because Herod seeks his death. Why would Herod perceive Jesus to be a threat? It certainly isn't because Herod is particularly concerned about Jesus transgressing food or Sabbath laws. It is not because Jesus tells people that they should love God and love their neighbors. It is not because Jesus lauds the grace of God and points toward the inclusion of Gentiles. These issues wouldn't be sufficient to rouse Herod from a nap. But something about Jesus causes the Pharisees to tell Jesus to "get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you" (Lk 13:31).

Some accounts of Jesus' life and ministry make his death at the hands of the state unexplainable. Herod did not see Jesus as a danger because he was a compassionate healer who spoke of justice, repentance, and transformation. Herod saw Jesus as a [p 55](#) threat because his ministry of healing was a sign of the in-breaking *reign of God*. Repentance was spiritual preparation for God's eschatological work of salvation.

Anyone familiar with the Jewish Scriptures knew that when God did act, he would not leave the rulers of this world unthreatened. This is what frightened Herod—the possibility that the advent of God's reign through Jesus might upset his own.

Whether Herod believed that God was at work in Jesus is beside the point. Herod displays no fear of God. Power was Herod's god. What he feared was the hope that Jesus might give to the disinherited. A populace that believed that God was on the verge of breaking in was dangerous. Rome ramped up security every Passover because Passover always threatened to rekindle the memory of God's mighty act to save. It was precisely inasmuch as Jesus was obedient to his Father and rooted in the hopes and dreams of Israel that Jesus revealed himself to be a great danger to the rulers of his day.

There is a lesson here for Black Christians. Political relevance is not so far above us that we have to ask who will ascend and get it. It is not so low that we have to descend to the depths of the earth to retrieve it. The political relevance of the gospel message is in the stories and songs of Israel that make up the pages of the Old Testament. These are stories of a God who fights for us and against the enemies of his people. These are stories of a God who turns his compassionate eye toward those whom society forgets. Rome knew this and so did Herod.

What does Jesus say when he finds out that his mission has brought him into conflict with the sitting king of Israel? He says, "Go and tell that *fox* for me, 'Listen, I am casting

out demons and performing [p 56](#) cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem'" (Lk 13:32–33, emphasis added).

Jesus' words show no deference to the political authority inherent in Herod's status. He calls him a fox. This is not a compliment. To be called a fox in Jesus' day meant being considered conniving and deceitful. What about Herod might have led to Jesus calling him a fox? Herod Antipas did not maintain his rule over Galilee because the people believed him to be the rightful ruler, but because he had the backing of the empire.¹⁴ His power was not real. His position was secured through posturing, compromise, and intrigue. Inasmuch as his concern was first and foremost his own survival and not the good of the people, the poor of Galilee could not look to him for succor.¹⁶

Herod was a fox, not a king. It is not even clear that he had the ability to carry out the threat levied against Jesus. As a false power Herod Antipas had no say in reference to the work the Father had given Jesus to do. The point here, is that *fox* is not simply an analysis of Herod's limited piety. It is a description of his *political activity as it* [p 57](#) *relates to the inevitable suffering of the people*. This is a statement made in full view of Pharisees and sure to become a matter of public record.

How might Jesus' words inform a theology of the political witness of the church? Jesus shows that those Christians who have called out injustice are following in the footsteps of Jesus. Thus, when Frederick Douglass asked what to a slave is the Fourth of July, he had strong theological justification. When the Southern Christian Leadership Counsel took to the streets of Birmingham, Selma, and Memphis to speak openly about the sinfulness of the political landscape of its day, they were not far from Jesus and his statements about Herod the fox.

Jesus' words go beyond the dismissal of Herod to address the reception of prophets more generally. Jesus says that it is impossible for prophets to die outside of Jerusalem (Lk 13:33). His point is that there is a tradition of rejecting those God sends as messengers of his will. It is very easy to misunderstand Jesus' words about rejecting the prophets. We can assume that ancient Israel only rejected the "religious" message of the prophets not the things we deem political. But in Jesus' day there was a tradition that Isaiah the prophet had been killed in Jerusalem. This justifies a brief discussion of Isaiah's message.

Isaiah is filled with messengers that offer a criticism of Israel both for its failure to follow the one true God and for its oppression of the poor:

- Ah, you who join house to house, / who add field to field, / until there is room for no one but you, / and you are left to live alone / in the midst of the land! (Is 5:8)
- Ah, sinful nation, / people laden with iniquity, / offspring who do evil, / children who deal corruptly, / who have forsaken the [p 58](#) LORD, /

who have despised the Holy One of Israel, / who are utterly estranged! (Is 1:4)

- Learn to do good; / seek justice, / rescue the oppressed, / defend the orphan, / plead for the widow. (Is 1:17)

Isaiah was not rejected simply because he told Israel to worship Yahweh. He was rejected because Isaiah realized that true worship of Yahweh had implications for how one treated their neighbor. According to Isaiah, Israel's oppression of the poor in his day betrayed a practical apostasy.

For Isaiah, piety must bear fruit in justice. Jesus knew that inasmuch as his message of justice impinged on the lives of the powerful, he was liable to rejection and death. Jesus not only embraced this prophetic tradition, he declared himself the climax of it by claiming that the acceptable day of the Lord (Is 61:1–2) had arrived in him (Lk 4:14–21).

Jesus' statement about Herod was not some spur of the moment criticism of a political figure that he did not like. Jesus saw his ministry as a part of a tradition of Israel's prophets who told the truth about unfaithfulness to God that manifested itself in the oppression of the disinherited. Jesus drew on the prophets as he spoke truth to power. Therefore, those Black Christians who see in those same prophets the warrant for their own public ministry have Jesus as their support.

PAUL, BRIEFLY CONSIDERED

Paul is often seen as the patron saint of the establishment, but this can only be maintained by paying attention to select portions of his corpus. A holistic reading of Paul shows that he is willing to p 59 critique authorities with vigor when necessary. Rather than a full examination of all the relevant Pauline passages, I will only consider a fleeting turn of phrase at the opening of Galatians.

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians near the early portion of his writing career. He composed his letter to persuade a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile believers that faith in Christ was sufficient to make one a coheir to the promises made to Abraham and his ultimate heir the Messiah Jesus. As a part of his opening address to the churches of Galatia, Paul says the following: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (Gal 1:3–5). When Paul speaks about Jesus giving himself for our sins he is more than capable of saying that it effects our justification (Rom 4:25) or that Jesus' death makes us heirs in Christ of all things (Rom 8:32). Here his emphasis is different. Jesus gave himself for our sins "to rescue us from the present evil age."

What does it mean for Paul to call the age evil? New Testament scholar Martyn notes that Paul believed that the world was under the domain of evil spiritual powers before

the coming of the Messiah. This is important because elsewhere in Paul's writings he suggests that these same "powers" hold sway over earthly leaders and rulers.²³ The political, economic, and social policies of unredeemed rulers, then, are a manifestation of evil powers that are opposed by p 60 God. These powers (along with the problem of human sin) are the enemies God sent his son to defeat. For this reason, our modern delineation between spiritual and political evil when read back into Paul's thought is an anachronism.

The "present evil age" can be understood to include the demonic evil of slavery in Rome and economic exploitation of the populace, both of which existed because of the policies of Roman leadership as dictated by spiritual forces.

Most recognize that Paul's statement about the turning of the ages arises from his reading of that great Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Isaiah looks to the creation of a new heavens and a new earth after God changes the social and political lives of exiled Israel:

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD:
My servants shall eat,
but you shall be hungry;
my servants shall drink,
but you shall be thirsty;
my servants shall rejoice,
but you shall be put to shame....
For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind. (Is 65:13, 17)

See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them. (Is 42:9)

p 61 When Paul calls the present age evil and looks to the creation of a new one, he stands in the middle of the prophetic tradition. There are two dangers in evoking this tradition. We can flatten its message or underinterpret its implications. We can underinterpret it by saying that in Galatians Paul only has in mind "spiritual enslavement." Such a reading doesn't take into account how the transformed lives of believers changed the way that Christians lived in the world. Treating women equally, as called for in Galatians 3:28, would be a political act in an empire that had certain views about what a woman's place might be. The second reading overinterprets Paul's meaning by assuming that it is the work of the church to establish God's kingdom on earth in its fullness now. We live as witnesses to the kingdom and voice our words of protest when the present evil age oversteps its bounds.

It might help to look at Colossians. In Colossians, Paul says that God calls us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the beloved son (Col 1:13). When Paul speaks about the kingdom of darkness he primarily has in mind the dark spiritual forces that torment the people of God. As stated earlier, Paul believes that these dark powers also control earthly rulers. The economic, social, and

political oppression of the people of God is nothing more than the physical manifestation of the spiritual sickness at the heart of the empire.

According to Paul, Jesus saves us from our sins, and he also calls us into a kingdom that treats its people better than the way Rome treats its citizens. When Paul calls this age *evil* and says that we are *rescued* from it, it is a statement that we are no longer bound to [p 62](#) order our lives according to the priorities, values, and aims of this age. We are free to live differently while we await the coming of the true king. Calling the social and political order evil is a *political* assessment as well as a *theological* one. It is the assessment that Rev. Dr. King made in his critique of Jim Crow. King said that the current practices throughout the North and the South were a manifestation of the kingdom of darkness and that the kingdom of the beloved son called for a different way.

When Black Christians look upon the actions of political leaders and governments and call them *evil*, we are making a theological claim in the same way that Paul was. Protest is not unbiblical; it is a manifestation of our analysis of the human condition in light of God's own word and vision for the future. His vision may await an appointed time, but it is coming (Hab 2:1–4).

JOHN THE REVELATOR AND HIS VISIONS

The New Testament closes with a book that recounts the visions of John. These visions were sent to seven churches experiencing varying levels of persecution because of their fidelity to Jesus. As it relates to the political witness of the church, I want to ask a simple question. What does John think of the Roman Empire?

John's clearest depiction of the empire comes in a vision of her eschatological fall in Revelation 18. Speaking of Rome's demise he says,

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!
It has become a dwelling place of demons,
a haunt of every foul spirit,
a haunt of every foul bird,
a haunt of every foul and hateful beast. (Rev 18:2)

[p 63](#) In calling Rome Babylon he likens her to that great oppressive empire that conquered Israel.

John, much like Paul, probably drew on Isaiah, who condemns ancient Babylon for the same reasons that John condemns Rome. Isaiah says,

You will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:
How the oppressor has ceased!
How his insolence has ceased!
The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked,
the scepter of rulers,
that struck down the peoples in wrath
with unceasing blows,
that ruled the nations in anger
with unrelenting persecution. (Is 14:4–6)

Earlier Isaiah calls Babylon a tyrant (Is 13:11). God judges Babylon for their pretensions to be in the place of God (Is 14:13) *and* for the resulting oppression of the nations and lands under its thumb. In the same way, John looks at the moral life of Rome and says that she is doomed for destruction. This destruction is plainly the result of its socially and politically immoral culture.

John claims that rather than focusing on the flourishing of its people, Rome only cared about enriching itself. This was seen particularly in its immoral sale of human beings. John, then, composed a letter read aloud to churches that condemns the economic policies inscribed in law (slavery). He says that these immoral activities along with persecution of Christians (Rev 18:24) will bring about God's eschatological judgement.

[p 64](#) The question that ought to keep Christians up at night is not the political activism of Black Christians. The question should be how 1 Timothy 2:1–4 came to dominate the conversation about the Christian's responsibility to the state. How did we manage to ignore the clearly political implications of Paul's casual remarks about the evil age in Galatians and his wider reflections on the links between evil powers and politicians? How did John's condemnation of Rome in Revelation fall from view? Why did Jesus' public rebuke of Herod get lost to history? It may have been because it was in the best interest of those in power to silence Black voices. But if our voices are silenced the Scriptures still speak. But rather than leave it there, we conclude our reflections on the political witness of the church with a return to Jesus.

JESUS, PEACEMAKERS, AND PUBLIC WITNESS

Jesus' most famous address, known to history as the Sermon on the Mount, is recorded in Matthew 5–7. The mountain location echoes the giving of the law at Sinai. Just as the law was directed toward life in the Promised Land, Jesus' words are directed toward life in God's kingdom. Jesus is the greater Moses because he does not simply repeat what he hears from God.³³ He speaks on his own accord as the divine king. If there is a place for the Christian to turn to for a way to witness in a world divided and torn by sin, this is it. I want to focus on what Jesus says about the desire for justice and the work of justice to his disciples.

[p 65](#) We opened our reflections on the church's political witness with King's activities in Birmingham. His justification for his presence was simply that "injustice is here." He goes on to cite biblical characters who were moved to aid those in need. That leads to the question, Why did Paul or Isaiah or Amos care about justice?

Jesus explains what undergirds the actions of Paul, Isaiah, and Rev. Dr. King in two of his Beatitudes. He says, "Blessed are those who grieve, for they will be comforted.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled" (Mt 5:4, 6, my translation). To mourn involves being saddened by the state of the world. To mourn is care.

It is an act of rebellion against one's own sins and the sins of the world.

A theology of mourning allowed Rev. Dr. King to look on the suffering of the people in Birmingham and refuse to turn away. Mourning calls on all of us to recognize our complicity in the sufferings of others. We do not simply mourn the sins of the world. We mourn our own greed, lusts, and desires that allow us to exploit others. Sin is more than exploitation, but it is certainly not less. A theology of mourning never allows us the privilege of apathy. We can never put the interests of our families or our country over the suffering of the world.

Mourning is intuition that things are not right—that more is possible. To think that more is possible is an act of political resistance in a world that wants us to believe that consumption is all there is. Our politicians run on our desires by convincing us that utopia is possible here and they alone can provide it.

The second Beatitude at the center of our reflections moves beyond the suspicion raised in our mourning. It articulates our hope: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they p 66 will be filled." Hungering and thirsting for justice is nothing less than the continued longing for God to come and set things right. It is a vision of the just society established by God that does not waver in the face of evidence to the contrary. Mourning is not enough. We must have a vision for something different. Justice is that difference. Jesus, then, calls for a reconfiguration of the imagination in which we realize that the options presented to us by the world are not all that there is. There remains a better way and that better way is the kingdom of God. He wants us to see that his kingdom is something that is possible, at least as a foretaste, even while we wait for its full consummation. To hunger for justice is to hope that the things that cause us to mourn will not get the last word.

What does all of this have to do with the public witness of the church? Jesus asks us to see the brokenness in society and to articulate an alternative vision for how we might live. This does not mean that we believe that we can establish the kingdom on earth before his second coming. It does mean that we see society for what it is: less than the kingdom. We let the world know that we see the cracks in the facade.

This call to hunger for justice, in the context of Jesus sitting on a mountain, must be understood as a messianic word:

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
p 67 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Is 9:6–7)

The messianic son of David, as the agent of God's will, would be known for establishing justice on the earth. To hunger for justice in a messianic context is to long for God to establish his just rule over the earth through his chosen king. Righteousness or justice then, is inescapably political. Hungering for justice is a hungering for the kingdom.

The two Beatitudes discussed above articulate the desire for justice. The last Beatitude under consideration is where Jesus provides us with the practices of justice. Matthew 5:9 says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God." Why make peace and how do we go about achieving it? Jesus calls his people to be *peacemakers* because the kingdom of the Messiah is one of peace. Again we have the vision of Isaiah:

His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless *peace*
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. (Is 9:7, emphasis added)

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
p 68 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together; ...
*They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.* (Is 11:6–9, emphasis added)

Isaiah envisions a kingdom in which the hostility between nations (Isaiah 9:7) and the created order will be removed (Is 11:1–9). To call God's people to peacemaking, then, means beginning the work of ending hostility that will mark the Messiah's reign. To claim that Jesus envisions the end of personal hostility and to neglect ethnic or national hostility does not do justice to the kingdom theology undergirding the entire sermon.

What, then, does peacemaking involve and what does this have to do with the church's political witness? Biblical peacemaking is the cessation of hostilities between nations and individuals as a sign of God's in-breaking kingdom. Peacemaking involves assessing the claims of groups in conflict and making a judgment about who is correct and who is incorrect.

Peacemaking, then, cannot be separated from truth telling. The church's witness does not involve simply denouncing the excesses of both sides and making moral equivalencies. It involves calling injustice by its name. If the church is going to be on the side of *peace* in the United States, then there has to be an honest accounting of what this country has done and continues to do to Black and Brown people. Moderation or the middle ground is not always the loci of p 69 righteousness. Housing discrimination has to be

named. Unequal sentences and unfair policing has to be named. Sexism and the abuse and commodification of the Black female body has to end. Otherwise any peace is false and nonbiblical. Beyond naming there has to be some vision for the righting of wrongs and the restoration of relationships. The call to be peacemakers is the call for the church to enter the messy world of politics and point toward a better way of being human.

This peacemaking could be corporate, dealing with ethnic groups and nations at enmity, or it could be personal. When it is corporate, we are testifying to the universal reign of Jesus. When it is interpersonal, we are bearing witness to the work that God has done in our hearts. These things need not be put into competition.

The most interesting thing about this peacemaking is that it doesn't assume that those at enmity are believers. Jesus does not say make peace between Christians, but make peace. He doesn't say establish peace by making them Christians, but make peace. Why? Because peacemaking can be evangelistic. Through our efforts to bring peace we show the world the kind of king and kingdom we represent. The outcome of our peacemaking is to introduce people to the kingdom. Therefore the work of justice, when understood as direct testimony to God's kingdom, is evangelistic from start to finish. It is part (not the whole) of God's work of reconciling all things to himself.

CONCLUSION

At the heart of this chapter has been the desire to think through the church's interaction with the powers and rulers of our day. What is our responsibility? Much of the popular conversation on the Christian's duty focuses on the call to pray found in 1 Timothy 2:1–7 and p 70 the call to submit found in Romans 13:1–7. I have argued that neither of those passages, rightly understood, limits the Christian political witness, although it might inform the means. First Timothy 2:1–4 calls for prayer for all people, especially rulers. Timothy does not speak to what we might do when our convictions do not align with the empire. That same letter contains a criticism of a standing policy in Rome, namely slave trading (1 Tim 1:8–11). Romans 13:1–7 should be seen more as raising questions around theodicy and the negation of divinely sanctioned violence than a citadel against which no call for justice can prevail.

Turning to the wider New Testament witness, we looked at the testimony of Jesus. His criticism spoke to Herod's character *and* his politics. If Jesus could tell the Jews of his day that the leader of their country was corrupt, then why can't we? Paul's statement about the present evil age in Galatians also contains a rather unobvious condemnation of the current political order. In much the same vein, John had

strong words to say about Rome. We concluded with a return to Jesus' words and an examination of the Sermon on the Mount and its relationship to the political witness of the church.

The Black Christian, then, who hopes and works for a better world finds an ally in the God of Israel. He or she finds someone who does more than sympathize with our wants and needs. This God steps into history and reorders the universe in favor of those who trust in him. He calls us to enter into this work of actualizing the transformation he has already begun by the death and resurrection of his Son. This includes the work of discipleship, evangelism, and the pursuit of personal holiness. It also includes bearing witness to a different and better way of ordering our societies in a world whose default instinct is oppression. To do less would be to deny the kingdom.¹

¹ Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 47–70.