

“The End of Christendom?”

Philippians 3.17-21

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Earlier this week the Mason Ministerial Association met for its regular monthly lunch gathering. I have really been enjoying the Ministerial Association the past few years; we have worked to develop a good fellowship and a strong trust amongst ourselves. Ministerial associations are not always like that! There’s a lot of respect for one another, and for each other’s ministries, which is helping to create stronger feelings of connection and partnership between the various churches in town that participate.

At our meeting this week, after I shared about our joyous celebration here last week as we dedicated our newly renovated building, and after some of my colleagues shared some of their good news or – in one case – a health concern, our attention turned to other matters ... and, particularly, the upcoming election. It seemed that we all wanted to talk about it. That in and of itself was a bit unusual; politics and religion don’t often mix well together. But the tenor of the election is so dramatically different this year from what it has been in the past, we wanted – *needed* – to talk about it. We eventually – I think to everyone’s surprise – wound our way to sharing who we will be voting for, and why. There was no debate, no rancor, no judgment – just an honest sharing, and attentive listening. It truly was a remarkable conversation. In my past experience, whenever pastors of a diverse array of denominations talk politics, usually people fall pretty strongly into one of two camps. Not so this time. There were at least three different positions around the table; actually, maybe four. Some of the clergy in town are not planning on voting along the party lines they have traditionally voted for in the past. A couple indicated they have never felt so conflicted about an election as they are this year. The *civility* in our conversation was profound – a far cry from what we’ve seen and heard all over the media. And we all walked away from that conversation feeling like we had *learned* something.

I’ve been intrigued by the different approaches Christians are taking to this election. For most of my life I have known a diverse array of Christians, some of whom lean left and some of whom lean right, but something is different this time around. This year, I know a number of Christians who are voting for candidate A, some Christians who are voting for candidate B, at least two Christians who are voting for candidate C, at least one Christian who is voting for candidate D, and one Christian in another state who – after much reading and thought and prayer – decided she did not feel comfortable voting for *any* of the three options available in her state (here in Michigan we have six) and is planning on abstaining this time. This particular election is causing many Christians to really wrestle with their values and their convictions. What do we really *value*, and how does that influence the way we vote?

Several weeks ago I received a large envelope in the mail from a well-known Christian organization. It was an interesting read. Basically, the mailing said there is one issue that matters more than any other in this election, namely, Supreme Court nominees. I found myself thinking, “Wait a second. That matters more than foreign policy? More than wisdom and knowledge and leadership skills? More than personal character and honesty and integrity? You’re telling me that we could put *anybody* into office, so long as they put the *right* kind of people on the Supreme Court, who will likely vote a certain way?” Yes, that’s what they were saying. And I discovered at the Ministerial Association meeting that there is one pastor in town who believes *exactly* that, and who will be voting accordingly. There are some significant decisions the Supreme Court has made that he – and many other Christians – would like to see overturned, because he does not believe they line up with Christian values. His vote for president is more about future potential Supreme Court decisions than anything else.

Regardless of how you feel about any of those issues, what I want to suggest is this: that’s an attempt to hold on to what might be called “traditional Christian values” in an increasingly secular society. Holding onto “traditional Christian values” by force of *law*. If we can just get our *laws* to say what we think they ought to say, then we will still feel like we’re a Christian nation.

Folks, I got news. Maybe we’re not a Christian nation anymore. And maybe that’s ... okay.

History lesson. Big picture. Christianity was born 2000 years ago in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. For three centuries, Christians were surrounded by temples to Jupiter and Mars and Artemis and a host of other Roman gods. Christianity was frequently misunderstood, sometimes persecuted, and yet it thrived. It grew by leaps and bounds. People were attracted to Christianity in part because of the *integrity* with which the Christians lived their lives. Christian beliefs gave people *meaning* and *hope* and *joy* that people were not finding elsewhere. It grew, and it grew, and it grew.

By the year 300, there was a large Christian presence throughout the Roman Empire. In 303 the Emperor Diocletian launched the Great Persecution, the most severe persecution of Christians in Roman history. Churches were destroyed; scriptures were burned; priests were imprisoned. Diocletian stepped down in 305 due to a debilitating sickness. Constantine emerged as the next major Roman Emperor, though he had to fight for it, securing his victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in the year 312. According to legend, before the battle, Constantine had a dream in which he was told to mark the sign of the cross on his soldiers’ shields. Another version has it that he saw a cross in the sky, and the words *In Hoc Signo Vinces* – “with this sign, you will conquer.” Constantine won the battle. Not long afterward, Christian symbols began appearing on Roman coins. In 313 Constantine’s Edict of Milan made Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire and prevented Christians from being persecuted. Constantine supported the church financially, granted privileges to Christian clergy (including exemption from certain taxes), promoted Christians to high office, and returned property that had been taken from Christians during the earlier persecutions. Scholars debate whether Constantine truly converted to Christianity, or whether he was just being politically expedient, but the effect was clear: the Roman Empire was on its way to becoming the “Holy” Roman Empire. *Christendom* was born. *Christendom* – the establishment of Christianity as the official, or at least the favored, national religion.

In the Western world, we have effectively been living with Christendom for seventeen centuries. A growing number of social scientists argue that we are now living in a “post-Christian” era, that Christianity is losing – or had already lost – its favored place. Consider the rulings, for example, back in the ‘60s and early ‘70s that curtailed prayer in school, or the replacement of Christmas parties with holiday parties that also honor the traditions of other religions. The days of Christendom may be over.

And *maybe that’s okay*. Maybe we don’t *have* to live in a society where Christian values and societal values match perfectly. Maybe we don’t *have* to fight for laws that advocate Christian values and that try to curtail practices deemed non-Christian. Maybe we don’t *have* to worry about what the Supreme Court might decide is or is not legal according to the Constitution. Maybe it’s okay for some things to be legal, even if we as Christians might disagree with them. Maybe it’s okay to let Christendom die ... because one of the time periods in history when Christianity was most alive and well was when it *wasn’t* the official religion of the Roman Empire, in the three centuries *before* Christendom was born. Maybe we need to become less like the 20th-century church and more like the 1st-century church, where we had a tremendous amount of clarity about how *Christian* values differed from *secular* values. Take the great cosmopolitan city of Corinth, for example, a city where every vice under the sun existed and thrived, a city that was arguably more sexually charged than even our own culture today. When people – adults – became Christians, in many cases, there were practices they had to give up, practices they *chose* to give up, because Christianity was a *lifestyle*, not a set of political views, and it was the *lifestyle* that appealed to them. Christians weren’t trying to make the laws in Corinth match *their* values – what they were doing, instead, was maintaining clarity about what *their* values were, and asking – inviting – people to leave their worldly values behind as they chose to follow Christ. And it *worked*. Christianity was alive and well, robust and growing. Christianity can exist – even *thrive* – without Christendom.

Maybe Christendom is dying. *Maybe that’s okay*. Maybe we should stop fighting a political battle that we seem to be losing and that is, frankly, turning a lot of people off. Maybe we should invest our energy elsewhere: in *sharing the faith* with our neighbors around us. Introducing, or re-introducing, them to the richness of the gospel, and the call of Jesus Christ, without trying to make them adopt certain political views in the process. Going back to the principles and practices of the early church, in its first three centuries, as they gathered around the Word, broke bread, prayed, served, *lived*, in Christian community, in a pagan world that didn’t always understand them and sometimes feared them. We’ve done it before. We can do it again. We don’t need to be so *afraid* of losing our place of privilege.

Which brings me, at last, to our passage in Philippians. Paul urges his hearers to look for role models – not in society, but in the church. The people who truly *walk the walk*. The people who don’t just *talk* Christian beliefs and practices – they *live* them. “Our citizenship,” Paul reminds us, is not ultimately here. Yes, we are citizens of the United States, just as he was a citizen of the Roman Empire, but his point is there’s *another* citizenship that matters *more*. “Our citizenship is in heaven.” Which means that, no matter what happens on November 8, whether the candidate you voted for wins or loses, whether you are excited or whether you are afraid, *God is still on the throne*. No election can *ever* change that. *God is still on the throne*. As long as we keep our focus there, we’ll be okay. *We’ll be okay*.

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