

Protagonist Corner

An Appeal to Christians Concerning the Relative Insignificance of the Presidential Election

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In the spring, I asked my daughter where she would like to visit if she could travel anywhere in the world. Her eight-year old answer: “Monticello.” Apparently I have done something right as a parent. My cup runneth over.

We flew into Richmond early on a Friday and then drove to the plantation. It is a land of shadows and ghosts; the plantation’s mystique was exacerbated that morning by the sweltering fog. We toured the house and walked the grounds. Though I was well familiar with Jefferson, it was remarkable to see his genius through the objects that comprised his life: maps, fossils, journals, scientific tools, musical instruments, and the famous library. At the end of our visit, we began the slavery tour on Mulberry Row.

I was not prepared for the emotional impact of this final tour. It was not the reconstructed dirt-floor shacks that got to me or the Hemmings saga or even the reality that this President owned over 600 human beings during his lifetime. I knew those facts from books. What the facts can’t make you feel is proximity. Mulberry Row is virtually in the physical shadow of the mansion.

I simply could not shake the conception of people being born, living, and dying, knowing nothing beyond a few acres in the shadow of such opulence. They lived in a closed, totalitarian universe that defined reality. Those born there must have simply assumed that was the way the world had always worked: whites in the mansions, blacks in the shacks, world without end.

I walked to the President’s grave, and when my daughter trailed off, I shook my fist. “Goddamn you,” I said. “And Goddamn your enlightenment project.” For if a system that is predicated on education, science, and human progress is capable of producing such injustice, then something about those worlds of thought is patently wrong, not contradictory, but wrong. I know all that is harsh, but even Jesus thought some sins were unforgivable.

I have been tasked to write some thoughts about how we preachers might navigate our charged political environment in the wake of the American presidential election. Monticello is no doubt a windy route to get into this discussion. My point is to suggest that it is time to shake our fists in a new way. We have shaken our fists at “the system” for a long while, and of course there were many Christians in Jefferson’s day doing the same. But perhaps, as with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s situation, the system is no longer salvageable. So shouldn’t we shake our fists at the ideas that birthed this self-destruction and move on to build the system to which we are called? I am talking, of course, about the Church.

I’m not going to bog this piece down with a bunch of disclaimers. I have read Romans 13 and the prophets. I am not advocating for some sort of ecclesiological isolationism. I am advocating for a fresh magisterial vision of Christendom: first as ethnicity, then as nation.

In our compartmentalized world, where religion has its safe and tidy place, the conversion texts of the New Testament make little sense. This is principally because the texts aren't about conversion as we know it. Yes, a choice is being made and there is a crossing over, but why must this be ritualized by baptism, profession, and community? And why in Acts does a thoroughgoing emphasis on the ethnicity of the gospel's hearers persist? One reason is surely because the message required and created a new ethnicity. For them, baptismal water was thicker than blood. Zeba Crook argues that this is precisely how we should understand the term *faith* in the context of the New Testament: not as a private assent but as the loyalty that cohered the ancient systems of empire, slavery, even philosophic guilds.¹ "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." Such a very physical assertion was nothing short of a reimagining of the facilities of the human person. We are talking about something far beyond the "fictive kin" construct that the social science critics push. Early Christian conversion was more like stem cell research.

New ethnicity, of course, naturally births a new nation. I suppose this is what made Rome so nervous about our ancestors. Our present pluralism is homogeny in comparison to theirs, and the Caesars certainly had little interest in tamping down on new religious thoughts. The problem was that the Christians didn't act like a religion. They meant instead to function as an interstate, self-sustaining nation. Richard Horsley has noted this in Paul's letters, where an emphasis on geography, autonomy, and economic solidarity constituted the church as an "alternative society." The letters, then, were "Paul's instruments to shore up the assemblies' group discipline and solidarity over against the imperial society, 'the present evil age,' 'the present form of this world that is passing away.'"² Sometimes I think that communist nations who suppress the Bible understand it better than we do. We preachers have been playing with political explosives all along.

What does all of this matter to republicans and democrats, supporters of Trump, Clinton, or whoever else? I would not go so far as to say that the election doesn't matter. I do suggest that it matters far less than we have been groomed to think. Amidst the intemperate passions over certain jobs in Washington D.C., can I as a preacher engender such a vision of our vaulted sanctuary that makes the White House pale in comparison? Can I love the Bible with such heart that we are tempted to enshrine it under black lights for tourists to view? Can I boldly announce to patriots that there is a precious new patriotism available to all?

My ethnicity is Christian. My nation is the Church. And we have no boundaries.

Notes

1 See Zeba Crook, *Reconceptualizing Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), 200ff.

2 Richard Horsley, "1 Corinthians: A Case Study of Paul's Assembly as an Alternative Society," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 52.