

Ekklesia Project Gathering 2019
Opening comments

Let's begin with one paragraph from Ekklesia Project's declaration, found on the website under "Who We Are":

We are unapologetically...political: We believe that the Kingdom of God transcends national identities and must be the primary focus of our political loyalty. All other loyalties – familial, political or ideological – derive their meaning by participating in the Body of Christ and bearing witness to his Kingdom. We hope to challenge ourselves and the Church to resist accommodation to America and analogous temptations globally. We humbly seek to be used by God so that together, as the Body of Christ, we might become more of what God has called us to be.

In early 2017, the board organized some conference calls for endorsers to talk about how their congregations were responding to the new moment in the US government. The resulting conversations varied widely, with some members experiencing a lot of tension within the congregations, some being mobilized to some new action, and some simply carrying on under conditions that they saw as not strikingly new. But one long-time endorser caught our attention with this comment: "Suddenly I find myself defending the US constitution, arguing about the rule of law. That's not something I did before, since I'd been focused on the church as the true polis. And I'm wondering: is this a sign that I'm learning something new or a sign that I'm selling out, losing hold on who I'm called to be?"

That question captured a struggle a number of EP members were having in the wake of the 2016 election. And as we talked about it, we began to see that this wasn't just a question about that election, which was just playing out trends that had been there all along. The question called us to notice a struggle that had been going on for quite a long while among us. It made us aware of differences in our own networks that we had not paid attention to.

So the board decided that it would be good for EP to have a more in-house Gathering to revisit a basic shared conviction, perhaps the one that most distinguishes the Ekklesia Project from other Christian networks: The church does not have a politics; it is a politics. The job of the church is not to make the world more just but to make the world the world, to allow it to be seen as what it is¹.

I want to take a few minutes to unpack some aspects of that conviction. I think we all know this, but it's good to spell it out at the start.

This view of the church derives from an understanding of Israel and Jesus, the Biblical story that is our story. God has not been calling individuals; we are called to be a community, a people of God, a sign to the world of the peaceable kingdom.² That means

¹Those sayings are common refrains in the work of Stanley Hauerwas.

² For a full treatment of this idea, see Gerhard Lohfink, Jesus and Community (

that the church is already now the presence of God's reconciling work, a contrast society, the true polis sojourning through history. Screwed up, sure; human, uncertain, contingent, all too often scandalous, but even so, given the gifts needed to be church for the sake of the world.³ God chooses the weak of this world, the small, to confound the wise. The church is a witness to what God has done and is doing and will do.

The world's social order is the domain of the powers: economic and political forces are the result not just of human decisions but also in a way we don't entirely understand of a spiritual struggle that God will, in time, end⁴. We do not control that struggle: in the midst of it, we keep declaring God's goodness to ourselves and to all. That is who the church is.

Then there's the state. Some of our friends have drawn on Weber's definition of the state as that bureaucratic structure which has a monopoly on the use of lethal force⁵. It may do other things as well, but the state is by definition coercive, and its nature is to protect itself by use of that force. "War is the health of the state," went the old claim.⁶ A Christianity that identifies its mission with the state cannot be a witness to the peaceable kingdom.⁷

In our own time, we are confronted with a particular kind of state, the liberal nation-state, which is a moral mistake. In such an organization, justice has to be what we can agree on by means of some kind of majority rule or system of law—which is to say that justice is not about what people deserve, about what is good for humans, what purpose human life serves or about the love of God. It cannot be about those things because the liberal state claims to have no commitment on those matters. The shared story is only that we have escaped shared stories; the purpose is that everyone is free to define his or her own purpose. And so that modern state is not a system of mutual work to discern and live toward a common good, which is what a "politics" refers to; it is "war by other means."

Fortress Press, 1984) or Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the People of God (Michael Glazier Books, 1999).

³ See Hauerwas and Sam Wells, "The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives It," in The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics (Blackwell Publishing, 2011).

⁴ Those interested in thinking more about the scriptural references to the powers and principalities can start in the work of William Stringfellow.

⁵ There's a brief explanation of this approach in the Introduction of William Cavanaugh's Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

⁶ That was the title of an essay by Randolph Bourne, but it comes into my thinking from Dorothy Day, who referred to it in her account of her conversion, The Long Loneliness (HarperOne, 2009). The original text is available at <http://fair-use.org/randolph-bourne/the-state/>

⁷ I have in mind here Stanley Hauerwas' The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991). War and the American Difference (Baker Academic, 2011) offers sharp updates on Christianity and US war-making.

Or war by the same old means.⁸

And in particular, the US is a liberal state that has a long history of entanglement with Christianity. Stanley Hauerwas's work aimed at Protestant and more recently Catholic ethics in the US, which took as their task helping the US fulfill its exceptional role in the world. But that American exceptionalism is a lie and the US experiment was always profoundly morally mistaken, an attempt to create justice through capitalism and liberal (procedural) democracy. It began in slavery and genocide, and that should have told us something right off the bat, though it did not and has not. That history creates a particular urgency for Christians in the US to distinguish the mission of the church from that of the US.

Critics have often claimed that such a focus on the church as politics paired with this criticism of the state produces a position of "withdrawal" from responsible social engagement.⁹ Our own communities have demonstrated again and again that engagement on the church's own terms, rather than on the state's, is both possible and constructive, sometimes beautiful and moving. And anyway, as Stanley Hauerwas has often said, withdrawal isn't an option when you are surrounded. There's nowhere to go to get out of this culture, this order. If we think we can find a way to do that, we're deceiving ourselves.

What we are doing at this gathering presupposes all of that, both that understanding of the modern state, that view of the world, that understanding of the church as a people who discern together by their lives how to seek the good that is already given to us. The questions we are taking up arise within that way of seeing, not in opposition to it.

- How, given who we are, will we face weakening of even the minimal liberal rule of law?
- What is the role of protest against injustice? or of participation in lobbying legislators, who often share our baptism? or of working with people of good will who hold power in this government and are trying to move it toward something better?
- How does attention to racial injustice, to the experience of communities who have had to be more tuned in to the state's coercive power because of its impact on their bodies, help and challenge those who are just now recognizing that reality?
- Does our sense of the church as worldwide, reaching far beyond the boundaries of the US, draw us more into or more away from involvement in work on US state issues?
- How --if at all -- is the US different now than it was twenty years ago, when we were beginning?
- What are we learning? What are we being called to?

⁸ This paragraph is a hint at the rich argument of Alasdair MacIntyre's in [After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory](#) (University of Notre Dame, 2007).

⁹ Phil Kenneson's [Beyond Sectarianism: Reimagining Church and World](#) (Trinity Press International, 1999) does a great job exploring and exploding this criticism.

We who were tasked with organizing this Gathering asked, perhaps pressured, some of our members (including me) to speak to these questions during this gathering. We've specifically asked people who have different approaches, so that their talks, their variety of views, can make room for us to discuss and question among ourselves, to recognize the disagreements that exist among us and to take time for discernment together about these pressing questions.

We come together as friends, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and there's joy in that. But that does not mean that we always agree. That's the truth, not a scandal or a problem. Our friendship in Christ, who is faithful to us, who is merciful with us, makes room for us to talk truthfully with each other. We can help each other to speak, to think, and to listen. That, in fact, is essential to what it means to be a politics: to struggle together to discern when we are uncertain and when we disagree about how we will live in and toward our common good.

Speaking truthfully is a gift of the church. I think we all know how friends and family – and fellow church members-- can lie to each other or evade the truth as a way to “keep the peace.” But false agreement is not what the peace of Christ means. It's bad for the intellect and bad for the soul. We live in the gift of one baptism that has given us a bond. Within that, we can speak truthfully because we know we are surrounded by mercy. We are a people who welcome strangers and love enemies, and that has to include those of our friends who may turn out to be strangers, even opponents, at times.

As we talk during this gathering, as we perhaps argue about who we should be in this moment, here's a thought I want to leave you with: God does not need us to win. Christianity is not about our winning. That's not our story, not our gift, not our politics. So we can take the time to tell each other the truth about our hearts, to speak our uncertainty or confusion, to listen to what we don't agree with, to speak frankly about why we disagree, to seek to better know God. God is not threatened by our process of thinking truthfully together. We shouldn't be afraid of it either.

These few days are probably not sufficient time for us to come to agreement, and anyway the diversity of our ecclesial locations means that unanimity about what to do probably is not what this group should aim for. Nevertheless, we can take the opportunity for some searching conversations about what God is doing and how we are to be faithful to it. Our politics requires attending to the movement of the Spirit. So I'm glad to be here to do that with you.