

**TODAY, MOMENTOUS CHALLENGES
IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH AND AMERICAN SOCIETY
SET THE STAGE FOR UNITED METHODISTS TO RETURN TO THE
FOUNDATIONAL REALITY: THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST.
“THE ONE THING NEEDFUL” AND “FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP” BELOW
ATTEMPT TO ENCOURAGE TRUST IN AND OBEDIENCE TO
THE LORD OF THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.**

THE ONE THING NEEDFUL: MISSING FROM DR. LAWRENCE’S VISION OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dr. William B. Lawrence has a been-there-done-that knowledge of The United Methodist Church. Among his many other accomplishments, he has: belonged to four Annual Conferences; pastored congregations in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC; taught and administered at Duke University’s Divinity School, Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, and Southern Methodist University’s Perkins School of Theology; attended, as a delegate, two General Conferences; and served for eight years on the Judicial Council (four as its president). From his denomination’s inside, from its humble locations to its commanding heights, Dr. Lawrence knows his church. Therefore, when Lawrence speaks and writes, United Methodists should stop in their tracks, then read or listen or watch, to learn from him.

Recently, Dr. Lawrence published an extended essay. “A Question of Doctrine: Whither The United Methodist Church?” appeared in the Methodist Review (12 [2020], pages 1-59). As his essay’s title warns, he demonstrates an obvious commitment to the protected status and prominent role of doctrine in the faith and life of The United Methodist Church.

Several years ago this elder was invited to be an “expert witness” in a church trial in eastern Pennsylvania. Preparing to testify, I was repeatedly coached by trial officials: “Base your testimony on The United Methodist Church’s doctrine [that is, on what the church officially believes]—not on theology [that is, on what an individual personally thinks].” This distinction

between doctrine and theology aids Dr. Lawrence in underlining the importance of doctrine in the denomination’s faith and life.

However important the church’s doctrine appears to be to Dr. Lawrence, the church’s Constitution seems to drive his thinking about, and vision of, The United Methodist Church. Perhaps his years of service on the Judicial Council (which functions like The United Methodist Church’s United States Supreme Court), always addressing constitutional matters, have formed his Constitution-driven view of the church.

Committed to doctrine and Constitution, Dr. Lawrence contends in his essay: The United Methodist Church lives rightly and righteously, only and always, when the church’s doctrine and especially Constitution are scrupulously followed. When doctrine and Constitution are honored, the church maintains its Wesleyan ethos of grace and avoids degenerating into a Levitical church of law.

Narrative and Catastrophe

In his essay, Dr. Lawrence narrates a story of The United Methodist Church, over the last 50 years, that has doctrinal devolution at its center: more specifically, “disappearing Doctrinal Standards, declining attention to the importance of doctrine, and deteriorating connections between doctrine and discipleship. [He] argues that, if The United Methodist Church dies, one cause of death will have been theological [to be precise, doctrinal] neglect.” (p. 2) According to Lawrence, this doctrinal declension led to the church’s “obsession with homosexuality that has created conflicts in conferences, congregations, and countries.” (p. 2)

Dr. Lawrence’s telling of United Methodist history begins with the founding General Conference of 1968. Months later, during the summer of 1969, “the Stonewall

Riots” occurred in New York City. These riots marked the first truly national, even international, push for “gay rights” and “gay liberation.” Because of the riots, according to Dr. Lawrence, “United Methodist clergy and laity, who had become accustomed to a closeted system, soon discovered that things were changing in society and had to change in the church.” (emphasis added, p. 43) Some members of the 1972 General Conference were prepared to make this “change in the church.”

To their chagrin, including Dr. Lawrence’s, the first General Conference held after the Stonewall riots voted to add the following dependent clause to the end of the new denomination’s Social Principle on human sexuality: “though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” (The Book of Discipline [1972], p. 86) For Dr. Lawrence, this was the catastrophe for The United Methodist Church. For him, this was the beginning of the end for the new denomination. For in this singularly significant legislative act, General Conference: revealingly ignored its church’s standing “Doctrinal Statements” (The Articles of Religion and The Confession of Faith); adopted an untested moral-theological claim, with the help of “a few disputed Biblical texts” (p. 45), to function as doctrine; laid a foundation for future General Conferences to build on, by adopting additional legislation on human sexuality that would minimize grace and maximize law (e. g., disallowing clergy from conducting same-sex services and from engaging in same-sex sex); and began to change The United Methodist Church’s ethos from grace-filled to law-bound.

According to Dr. Lawrence, when the 2019 Special General Conference voted to adopt the Traditional Plan, with its disciplinary provisions that suppress grace, The United Methodist Church, “as a ‘body of Christ,’” demonstrated its “sharper elbows, firmer fists, crankier spirits, and weaker hearts for the mission of Christ... Indeed, the denomination as an institution may be terminally ill.” (p. 21)

Within a year, the next General Conference will probably gather to adopt a managed, efficient schism that will separate The United Methodist Church into two or three denominations. According to Dr. Lawrence’s narrative, this will have happened primarily because of the adoption of the incompatibility language nearly fifty years ago, which pushed aside official church doctrine (especially The Articles of Religion and The Confession of Faith, which are protected by the Constitution) and put in their place something that functioned like doctrine (but was not actually doctrine). This incompatibility provision was the pill that poisoned, debilitated, and is about to destroy the body.

To be sure, Dr. Lawrence’s telling of United Methodist history and its “obsession with homosexuality” is more interesting and detailed than the outline above. But the prior paragraphs attempt to summarize what he—as an essayist, historian, theologian, and jurist—proposes.

“One Thing Is Needful”

In Luke 10, Martha busily serves Mary and Jesus. Mary listens intently to Jesus’ teaching. Jesus says, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken from her.” (vv. 41-42, RSV) Again, “one thing is needful.” That is true for Mary. For Martha. For Dr. Lawrence. For this elder. For The United Methodist Church. “[O]ne thing is needful.” And that is Jesus Christ, His being present, His teaching, and His leading.

Dr. Lawrence believes doctrine plays a large role in The United Methodist Church. So does The Book of Discipline. So does The Confessing Movement. So does this elder.

Furthermore, Dr. Lawrence contends that the Constitution plays a defining role in The United Methodist Church. So does The Book of Discipline. So do most United Methodists. So does this elder.

However, doctrine and the Constitution exist in The United Methodist Church to point the church beyond itself and toward Jesus Christ. In The United Methodist Church, doctrine and the Constitution function as servants of Jesus Christ. They are two means to one end: Jesus Christ, the person, the presence, the word, the guide. Dr. Lawrence forgets this one thing needful. (His forgetfulness might have its roots in his constitutionalism. After all, the Judicial Council is not allowed to interpret the content of official church doctrine. Therefore, it could be said that the Judicial Council is forbidden a doctrinal voice in the church. By neglecting the one thing needful in this essay, Dr. Lawrence is simply mimicking the doctrinal reticence of the Judicial Council.)

But in fact, both doctrine and the Constitution direct The United Methodist Church to Jesus Christ. Evidence for this claim follows.

Doctrine directs The United Methodist Church to Jesus Christ. The Articles of Religion declare: “The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men [sic] in which the pure Word of God [Jesus Christ] is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance [so that Jesus Christ is present in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion], in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” (Article XIII--Of the Church) Clearly, this doctrine, whose status is protected by the Constitution (The Book of Discipline, Paragraph 17), points the church to Jesus Christ.

Likewise, The Confession of Faith states: “We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ....It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God [Jesus Christ] is preached by men [sic] divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment [so that Jesus Christ can be present]. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit [the Spirit of

Christ, sent by God the Father and God the Son] the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.” (Article V--The Church). Again, doctrine urges the church to do those things through which Jesus Christ visits, addresses, and guides His people.

Like doctrine, the Constitution turns The United Methodist Church toward Jesus Christ. The entire text of the Constitution begins with a sentence that beats around no bush: “The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.” (Preamble, emphasis added) So, because of its Constitution (not to mention the Bible and the Tradition!), the church trusts that Jesus Christ does not leave His people by themselves, to make their own decisions and go their own way, to fend for themselves. Rather, the church lives “under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.” The church recognizes and acknowledges that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church, and God’s grace helps the church to respond thankfully, trustingly, and obediently to Him.

The Preamble goes on to embed a larger doctrine of the church into the Constitution of the church with these words: “It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.” The church is even called “[t]he church of Jesus Christ.” Again, the very words of the Constitution mandate that The United Methodist Church look beyond the Constitution, beyond The Book of Discipline, beyond the actual people gathered around Word and Sacrament, to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, crucified then dead, resurrected then ascended and still living, rules over The United Methodist Church today. Regularly, Christ rules the church through the church’s doctrine and through the church’s Constitution. The church’s doctrine and Constitution are not simply organizational necessities that are in place to help the church survive modernity’s corruption and erosion of institutions. Instead, both doctrine and Constitution advise and remind the church to turn, and return, to Jesus Christ for life, for unity, for mission. Again, doctrine and Constitution do not help the church to be self-sufficient, capable of living without the Lord. Just the opposite is true. Doctrine and Constitution recall The United Methodist Church to the one thing that is needful—that is, to Jesus Christ, His being present, His teaching, and His leading.

To be sure, Dr. Lawrence’s vision of The United Methodist Church recognizes the importance of doctrine, and the significance of the Constitution, in the life of the church. That is necessary and good. However, he seems to suggest that if doctrine and the Constitution are rightly and fully followed, then the church will remain a well oiled machine that focuses on grace and that will flourish

without major problems in the future. But in his vision, where is Jesus Christ? Where is the Lord of the church? Where is His presence? Where is His teaching? Where is His guidance? And if it might be impolitely asked, where is His judgment?

This is the problem: Dr. Lawrence organizationally understands the doctrine and Constitution of The United Methodist Church. However, he would be a more faithful United Methodist by theologically understanding the doctrine and Constitution of the church. After all, organizational theory does not point beyond itself. Organizational theory has no Christology! But The United Methodist Church’s doctrine and Constitution—parts of the church’s organizational structure—actually contain Christology! They insist that the church look, again and again and again, to the Jesus Christ who is the Lord of the church.

When There Is Disagreement

The obvious question arises: What happens when there is serious, potentially church-dividing disagreement about a matter—be it human sexuality or another—in The United Methodist Church? The answer: United Methodists look first to Jesus Christ, to the Word of God, to see whether there can be a quick resolution. If quick resolution does not occur, if disagreement persists about how Christ is leading the church, then the matter should be taken up at General Conference. At General Conference, in the power of the Holy Spirit, United Methodists gather to discuss, debate, and decide on pressing matters in the church’s faith and life. Throughout this extended time of Christian conferencing, General Conference basically attempts to discern the governance of the Lord Jesus Christ over His church. General Conference is not simply dedicated to arguing about perceived problems, avoiding worst-case scenarios, and/or arriving at optimal solutions—although all too often, that is what it looks like. Instead, General Conference is committed to discerning, trusting, and obeying the governance of the Lord Jesus Christ over The United Methodist Church.

To be sure, General Conference is messy. Very messy. There, on full display, are many unpleasantries: self-confident bishops, who lack the necessary parliamentary skills, presiding over unruly plenary sessions and trying to make Robert’s-Rules-of-Order sense out of complex maneuverings on the floor; denominational bureaucrats advocating for their bureaucracies’ agendas; caucus groups (traditional, centrist/liberal, and progressive) constantly trying to convince those who will listen; exhausted delegates looking for relief from a nap in a chair or a shot of caffeine; observers disrupting the proceedings and other observers getting disturbed by the disrupters; world-weary journalists acting like they have seen it all before; and more. And yet, above and under and through all of the shenanigans at General Conference, United Methodists can and should be able to testify: this is our

church, with God's amazing grace, striving to discern how the Lord Jesus Christ is leading us. Doctrine and Constitution remind United Methodists to offer, in faith, that testimony about Jesus Christ's Lordship over The United Methodist Church—instead of letting General Conference and the strong emotions it can generate lead Methodists to walk away from it all.

During the 1972 General Conference, the infamous incompatibility language on human sexuality, imperfect and incomplete as it was, was proposed and adopted. This happened in a messy manner. It did not involve doctrinal theologians parsing and applying doctrine in church life. Nor did it involve denominational jurists educating delegates in the historical nuances of the Constitution and how they might be relevant to today's church. Again, this legislative step was taken not in a pristine, clinical, or academic setting. In an unpredictable, democratic environment, this step was taken by laity and clergy doing their best to discern how Jesus Christ is leading The United Methodist Church in the area of human sexuality.

And how was, and is, Jesus Christ leading? Evidently, Jesus Christ led through Scripture: the 1972 General Conference turned to the Bible and was directed by the consistent teaching of the Old Testament and the New Testament on marriage and human sexuality (especially Jesus' words in Matthew 19:3-9 and Mark 10:2-9, which John Wesley's Notes on the New Testament takes most seriously and plainly). Jesus Christ also led through Church Tradition: the 1972 General Conference found the Church through the ages had transmitted and defended its teaching on marriage and sexuality across countless cultures for nearly 2,000 years. Christ's leading through Tradition can also be glimpsed in how the incompatibility language relates, directly and indirectly, to United Methodist doctrine (especially The Articles of Religion and The Confession of Faith). Finally, Jesus Christ led through reason and experience: the 1972 General Conference embedded its prohibition of homosexual sex in the larger story of the Gospel and its understanding of creation, the "sacred worth" of each person, marriage, Church, and redemption. In the Gospel's story centered on Jesus Christ, the grace of God does not extinguish the law of God; rather, God's grace makes room for God's law. As the Messiah of Israel, Jesus Christ Himself obeyed the law. Furthermore, through His death on the cross for the sins of the world, He gives grace "that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:4, NRSV) That is what the 1972 General Conference decided.

United Methodists are allowed, by the Constitution, to disagree with this legislation passed in 1972. If they disagree, they are invited to work through established democratic procedures, of future General Conferences, to alter the language. In such an effort to change United Methodist law, doctrine would certainly be involved. In addition, the Constitution would most definitely be in

play. (So Dr. Lawrence's high evaluation of both doctrine and Constitution is right on.) However, throughout such deliberating and decision-making, discerning the guiding hand of the Lord Jesus Christ on The United Methodist Church would be General Conference's most basic task.

Christ and Church

Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus Christ is Lord of all—including the whole Church, which He creates, sustains, builds, and sends to proclaim the Gospel of His Lordship to the world. "[The Church] is his new creation by water and the Word. From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride; with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died." ("The Church's One Foundation," The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 545) As Lord over His whole Church, Jesus Christ is Lord over The United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church's doctrine and Constitution recognize and confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the church. And the doctrine and Constitution commit the church to live faithfully under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Lawrence envisions a United Methodist Church with doctrine and Constitution playing large roles in the faith and life of the church. That is good, constructive, and helpful. However, his vision does not seem to open The United Methodist Church to the "one thing [that] is needful:" to Jesus Christ and His Lordship. Unfortunately, Dr. Lawrence's vision reduces The United Methodist Church to a well intentioned, good-deeds-oriented organization.

With the "one thing [that] is needful" in mind, The United Methodist Church can be seen for what it now is—"oppressed," "rent asunder," and "distressed" (again, "The Church's One Foundation"), to be sure—but still ruled by the Lord Jesus Christ. (PTS)

FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: RESPONDING TO JESUS CHRIST

The political challenges of our time have actually been with us for some time. For years, now, politics has been driving some Christians, laity and clergy, to do things they would not have done in an earlier age. The following two stories will illustrate.

First Incident

The first incident occurred four years ago. The 2016 elections had just taken place. An acquaintance seemed especially distraught at the results of the presidential election. In the hope of engaging in some serious theological and political conversation, and of restoring a semblance of balance to our lives, I invited him to some Christian conferencing in the pastor's study about theology and politics. He obliged. The conversation was lengthy. Around three hours. In-depth. Serious. Sometimes sharp. Sometimes raw. At the end of the encounter, I suggested that he read The Barmen Declaration (Barmen,

Germany, 1934) and An Appeal for Theological Affirmation (Hartford, CT, 1975), both of which contain much Christian truth regarding public life and politics.

After reading through the two documents, he wrote a long letter to me. In his letter, he responded in a superficial way to both documents. In addition, he repeated his deep concerns with the recent election.

A couple of weeks passed. Out of the clear blue, without informing me, he emailed the letter that he had written to me, and introduced it with an inaccurate description of my political commitments, to the bishop of our area. Again, about his correspondence, I was not informed.

The bishop responded to him, by email, eleven days later. In her reply, she thoughtfully copied my District Superintendent and me. Her copy let me know, for the first time, that my theological-political discussion partner had been in concerned communication with my bishop.

Four years ago, this pastor felt like he had been secretly reported to authorities for doing something wrong or illegal. What is this? Are we living under a new, authoritarian regime? Whatever happened to the freedom of an American citizen to vote according to conscience? Is this the “new normal?”

Second Incident

Just over one year ago, a brother pastor was walking beside a road and was struck by a car. Sadly, he died. Many laity and clergy from across the annual conference assembled at a nearby local church to offer up our beloved brother to God’s mercy and judgment. The service included: giving heartfelt thanks to God for salvation unearned and providence undeserved, remembering a life well lived and a ministry faithfully offered, and being renewed in the ministry of Jesus Christ and His Church.

Following the lengthy service in the sanctuary and the brief service at graveside, and before crawling back into our cars to drive to our homes, the pastors of the area paused for conversation. During the light-hearted banter, one pastor seriously and honestly confessed: “I’m really looking forward to retiring in June. I can’t imagine having to be a pastor during the election of 2020.” His admission took me by surprise. This pastor, who was so looking forward to retirement, has been a friend for years. Never before had he seemed, in the least bit, timid or evasive about anything related to the pastoral office. Perhaps he was admitting that he had lost a piece of his heart for ministry in this time and place.

As it turned out, he indeed retired from pastoral ministry last June. And I wish him a retirement in which he continues to honor and glorify God. As it turned out, he was joined by your scribe, who also stepped aside from

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pastoral ministry—for different reasons.

My friend’s retirement, because of uneasiness over the 2020 election, is understandable. Many pastors (perhaps most), active and retired, are with him. Many express

sentiments similar to those he expressed on the steps of a church building that afternoon several months ago.

Politics Mostly Avoided

These two incidents remind us: we are living through a challenging, conflicted, sometimes chaotic time. So, not surprisingly, most of the time, we United Methodists avoid political discussions. When politics is not avoided by United Methodists and our friends, we approach the subject with extreme caution; that is, we are unusually guarded, to the point of self-censorship. Every once in a while, a conversation about politics begins but degenerates into a shouting match, and the bonds of baptism are truly tested. That is what we despise, and want to avoid, most of all.

Bottom-line question: what should a pastor say about the election at hand? In what follows, five principles will be proposed, and then a letter from Rev. Frank Pavone will be offered.

Five Principles

With election day fast approaching, and with our society politically polarized, I would like to propose five principles that might help clergy, laity, and local churches navigate these political waters.

1. *The Church and the Christian confess in word and in deed: Jesus is Lord.* That is our foundational confession. There is no other Lord of all. Political pretenders to being Lord, and those who follow such pretenders, are engaging in idolatry. No exceptions.

2. *Because Jesus Christ is Lord, and because the Church and the Christian place our ultimate trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we “do not put not [our] trust in princes.”* (Psalm 136:4, NRSV) We do not look on any candidate or elected official as The Answer for our city, state, or nation. Every candidate for, and every holder of, elected office are fallen, fallible people who do not, under any circumstance, command our ultimate trust. The Messiah has already come, and His name was, is, and will be Jesus.

3. *Confessing the Lordship of Jesus Christ and recognizing the fallibility of those in politics and government, the Church and the Christian believe that politics is not the most important thing in the world.* What more can be said?

4. *Confessing the Lordship of Jesus Christ and recognizing the fallibility of those in politics and government, the Church and the Christian, on their terms,*

should address matters related to the State. Again, guided by the Lord Jesus Christ, the Church and the Christian address political and governmental matters.

5. *Politics is more than a impolite grab for power; in its most elevated and democratic form, politics is the art of deliberating and deciding how to order our life together.* This high form of politics requires—indeed, mandates!—civility and the rule of law. The mob and the threat of the mob ruin the best that politics has accomplished, is accomplishing, and can accomplish.

The Letter

On August 20, 2020, Father Frank Pavone, the National Director of Priests for Life and the President of the National Pro-life Religious Council (to which Lifewatch belongs), released “An Open Letter to the Pastors of the United States.” For your consideration and perhaps edification, Fr. Pavone’s open letter, in lightly edited form, appears below.

Dear Pastors,

I write to you as a fellow preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel makes clear moral demands on individuals and on governments alike. The duty of preaching the Gospel involves not only the urgent exhortation to personal holiness and salvation, but the equally urgent exhortation to govern justly. Those responsible for the common good are obliged to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens and their freedom to live out their faith in the way that they—and not the government—see fit.

Anyone who has been paying attention over the last six decades has seen an organized and persistent effort to limit the Gospel to the private arena of our hearts and within the four walls of our churches.

Prayer and Bible reading have been banished from our schools. People of faith have had to fight in court to display religious symbols in public, and to conduct their businesses and ministries in accordance with their moral convictions. The right to even talk about our faith has been attacked on campuses and in the media.

And as the courts have increasingly upheld religious freedom, haters of religion have now taken to the streets to show their contempt for our beliefs by destroying its symbols.

Moreover, the legal protection afforded to our most fundamental good, life itself, and to God’s creation of marriage and the family, has been obliterated by amoral legislation and activist judges. Some 62 million children have been killed in the name of “freedom.”

Yet our Founding Fathers, anticipating the extent to which human nature can fall into error and sin, have provided for us a system of self-governance that can overcome and correct even these drastic departures from the laws of nature and of nature’s God.

Our nation is preparing to engage in two months of voting from September 4th, when the first absentee balloting begins, through Election Day, November 3. In

this time, some 100,000 electoral races will be decided at every level of state and federal government.

We therefore have a choice.

And the choice we have is as relevant to what kind of church we will be as it is to what kind of nation we will be.

On the one hand, we can adopt a mentality that says that we have neither the duty nor the possibility of changing the course of public policy in our nation. This mindset takes various forms and utilizes various excuses.

Some maintain we cannot really know the difference between what’s good for the nation and what isn’t, or that morality is up to each church or individual to decide.

Some maintain that churches and pastors are to stay far away from any engagement in politics or public policy, and simply preach a Gospel that pertains only to individual, interior spiritual life.

On the other hand, we have the choice to engage the battle, taking on the same mindset that led pastors to preach the large body of political sermons of our nation’s Founding Era, giving spiritual and moral energy and guidance to the very creation of our country.

We can commit ourselves to the same spiritual imperative that led believers to fight slavery and that led their descendants to move from the churches into the streets to battle segregation.

We can be convinced of the words Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached on the night before he was assassinated: “I’m always happy to see a relevant ministry. It’s alright to talk about ‘long white robes over yonder,’ in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s alright to talk about ‘streets flowing with milk and honey,’ but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.”

We can understand that equipping the People of God to elect the right candidates is not a **political** task but a **pastoral** task, because we are enabling them to carry out the Great Commission, teaching all nations to carry out everything our Lord has commanded.

This is our choice, as we enter Elections 2020.

Our Lord told us we need to be attentive to the signs of the times. The problem is not that the Church is becoming too political, but that our politics have become too pagan.

The political divide in our nation is no longer between two major parties that “have the same goals but different ideas of how to get there.” That was once true, but is no longer.

Now they have **different goals**, different views of

America, totally divergent views of morality, and completely incompatible views of religion and the Church.

[One national party's] platform has not only departed from the [other party's] platform in matters of policy. The differences are matters of **principle**. [One party's] platform has abandoned the principle of the God-given right to life and the liberty our Founders embraced to practice their Faith in their public life. Moreover, they have made their intentions clear to write into the laws and into the Courts a worldview completely devoid of those principles. [The "new normal?"]

This is not the kind of divide we can "rise above," nor the kind of battle from which we can exempt ourselves or our congregations.

This is a test for us. Either we recognize this problem, and like good shepherds, warn our people, or we retreat into a "neutrality" so absolute that it no longer allows us to see, much less neutralize, threats to the very survival of our nation and our ministries.

When a political party embraces the destruction of innocent life and the suppression of the freedom of the Church, it can no longer be treated in a neutral way by the Church. That party becomes an existential threat to the nation to which we pledge our allegiance and to the Kingdom to which we have pledged our souls....

Dear pastors, at the founding of our nation **Pastor John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg** declared in his sermon on January 21, 1776, "In the language of the Holy Writ, there is a time for all things. There is a time to preach and a time to fight. And now is the time to fight." He then threw off his clerical robes to reveal the uniform of an officer in the Continental Army. As one account relates, "Drums began to roll, men kissed their wives, and they walked down the aisle to enlist. The next day **Pastor Muhlenberg** led 300 men of his church and surrounding churches to join General Washington's Continental Army."

Nearly two centuries later, Catholic **Bishop Clemens von Galen** (d. 1946), preached fearlessly against the Nazi regime and its oppression of human life and religious freedom. He was not afraid to name and fight the political threat that was right before his eyes.

It is not that these men abandoned their pastoral mission in order to become political. It is, rather, that they saw the demands that their pastoral mission placed on them in the circumstances of their time, and courageously rose to the occasion.

That is the choice, and the opportunity, you and I have before us right now.

The choice for our nation is not simply about which political party will have power, but about which kind of America we will be—one marked by moral chaos, the Culture of Death, socialism and religious oppression, or one based on the freedom and principles our Founders made clear.

And the choice for our churches is whether we will retreat in silence and cowardice out of fear of being "too political," and hence become irrelevant to the world around us, or respond clearly and courageously to this moment of unprecedented conflict, and lead the People of God to protect their rights, their freedom, their Church and their beloved country.

Sincerely,
Fr. Frank Pavone

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Dr. Robert T. Osborn was an elder in The United Methodist Church and a professor in the Department of Religion at Duke University. His course on "The Theology of Karl Barth" was mind-changing, heart-changing, vocation-changing, and life-changing for this United Methodist elder—and many other students, I am sure. On September 17, he crossed the Jordan. May he rest in God's peace, and may his family know God's comfort.
- Bishop Leonard Fairley, who serves the Louisville Area of The United Methodist Church, released "Pray for Peace in Louisville" on September 23. His strong statement is faithful to the Gospel of Life: "With the announcement by the KY Attorney General, there will most likely be protests and counterprotests, that could very easily turn to rioting and violence. Just as we are called not to condone injustice, neither can we condone violence in any form...."

"In the face of the tragic death of Breonna Taylor, I find it part of my calling as a minister of the gospel, and as a passionate spiritual disciple of Jesus Christ, to call each of us to live into the truth of our better selves.

"While there comes a time when we must 'protest for right,' we can never allow those protests to deteriorate into destructive evil, hatred, and violence. Our Judeo-Christian heritage calls us always to guard each person's dignity and worth regardless of age, race, gender or socioeconomic status...."

A critical cynic might reply, "Look at the violence against people and property in Louisville. This statement accomplished nothing."

A measured, charitable response would be, "Even so, for two reasons, this statement should have been made. First, because it is true. Second, because without it, the violence in Louisville might have been even worse than it was."

Thanks be to God for this truth-telling bishop and his statement.

- Bill McGurn writes the column "Main Street" for The Wall Street Journal. His editorial entitled "Joe Biden's Leap of Faith" (08/25/20) is particularly informative. In his piece, McGurn expresses concern that, Biden has expressed his willingness to use the power of the federal



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- * **Amy Coney Barrett's focus**

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government to deny people and institutions their right to practice religious freedom. These denials “will come in the name of ‘reproductive health,’ ‘equity,’ ‘inclusion’ and ‘nondiscrimination.’ And a Biden administration would push them. How do we know? Because, as the New York Sun’s Seth Lipsky says, it’s hard to find a single religious-rights case where the Democrats took the religious side. He rattles off the list.

“‘Little Sisters of the Poor, Hosanna Tabor, the Green Family, the cake baker, the town of Greece, NY, the pharmacist who doesn’t want to fulfill birth control prescriptions, the Satmar Hasidim who want to require modest dress in their stores, the regulation of circumcision, the Bladenburg Cross,’ says Mr. Lipsky. ‘Name a case where the broad Democratic Party leadership sides with the religious party.’

“President Trump was mocked when he said Mr. Biden would ‘hurt God and hurt the Bible.’ But however inartful the words, today’s Democratic Party is willing to use the full force of the federal bureaucracy to bring religious institutions to heel—no matter how genuinely Joe Biden may love his rosary beads.

“Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have this upside down,” says Bill Mumma, CEO and chairman of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. ‘The Constitution protects religion from government interference. But in

their view any government objective, no matter how controversial, takes priority over religious belief.’”

In the days to come, remain alert to these matters.

● In 2006, Amy Coney Barrett delivered a speech to the graduating class of the University of Notre Dame’s Law School. Said she: “Your legal career is but a means to an end, and...that end is building the kingdom of God....[I]f you can keep in mind that your fundamental purpose in life is not to be a lawyer, but to know, love, and serve God, you truly will be a different kind of lawyer.” Seems to this pastor that Barrett’s comment is quite consistent with the stated mission of The United Methodist Church, which is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (The Book of Discipline [2016], Paragraph 120).

● *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* “Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.”

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