

Atlantic Baptist Article

Towards a Theology of Public Witness

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In this final issue of the Atlantic Baptist I will reflect a bit on how we might understand a theology of public witness in light of the current contentious context of Canadian culture. It seems that I can hardly turn on the radio or TV, or open a newspaper or magazine these days, without reading or hearing about some issue or another and how the church – more specifically, the “religious right” – is involved. Somehow the media conveys the impression that the church is *interfering*. Nonetheless, Christians of various denominations and assorted parachurch organizations are entering the fray of social, legal and political advocacy. They are, they say, taking a stand, fighting for our rights, defending truth.

Is this public witness? Just before his ascension, Jesus was with his disciples. In Acts 1:6-8 we read:

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my **witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:6-8).

When he said that they would be his witnesses, what did he have in mind? Did he mean that they would circulate petitions, organize protests, lobby government officials, write letters to the editors of local papers, advertise for or against particular issues, present briefs to legislative or parliamentary committees, join political parties in order to influence their policies? Are these the means by which they were to proclaim Christ? These are questions I wrestle with as I seek to understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ in 21st century Canadian society.

Lately I have been thinking a lot about the connections and tensions between truth, power and the Kingdom of God. Isaiah (59:14-15, NIV) says:

So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice.

Truth **has** stumbled in the streets. Surely the words of this Old Testament prophet, written to the people of Israel, are relevant today. I have argued in previous articles that we ought to speak truth in the public square. I have quoted Bob Briner who says that when we fail to speak truth publicly, we have failed our society. And I have quoted his profound warning that “when we try to change the world using the ways of the world, we will always fail” (from Final Roar).

It seems to me that truth, power and the Kingdom of God all come together in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus says, “I am the way and the **truth** and the life” (John 14:6). He also says that his **kingdom** is not of this world (John 18:36). When Jesus is before Pilate, beaten and bruised, Pilate says “don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” and Jesus answers, “You would have no **power** over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:10-11).

So, as we consider Christ's call to be witnesses for him in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, what does it look like for us? As we live as citizens of God's kingdom (the place where God's will is done, on earth and in heaven), are we to grasp and wield political power in order to present truth to this worldly kingdom? Will political influence earn a hearing for truth in the courts and parliaments of this land? Will aggressive and astute lobby efforts sway public opinion toward Christ and open the door for people to know him as the way, the truth and the life?

Politics is not about truth. It is about power. It is about influencing the right people, withholding votes, offering allegiance. It is not about truth, justice or righteousness. Truth has stumbled in the streets.

The gospel, however, is all about truth. And, the gospel is also about power – God's power, not ours. Aside from the Holy Spirit, we can do nothing for the Kingdom of God. So ought we to use political power in order to impose truth in the courts, parliaments and streets of our society? Doesn't it make sense that we should do whatever it takes to make people listen, make them respect truth, make them pass laws that protect truth?

I think of examples from Jesus' life when Satan tempted him to use his power: at the beginning of his public ministry, when Jesus spent forty days in the desert (Matthew 4:1), and at the end of his incarnational ministry when he is tried, beaten, taunted and ridiculed and hung on the cross. In these instances which frame his ministry, Jesus refuses to use his power to put Satan in his place or to avoid the shame and pain of the cross. What does Jesus' example teach us about wielding political or worldly power?

I believe that we are called to be disciples of Christ, to live according to the ethics and principles of the Kingdom of God, even in the midst of a stubborn and perverse world. Satan seeks to divert us from this purpose – to goad us into spending our time, energy, talents and resources on power struggles in the

political, legal and social realms. These are diversions. The temptation is to make this world a better place. Yet our ultimate purpose and aim is not to reform or Christianize the social order of this world, but rather, life everlasting in the Kingdom of God. Yes, we must speak truth and embody truth but let us leave to God the exercise of power. Public witness is incarnational ministry – being disciples of Christ, and allowing him to live in us and through us, accomplishing his purposes as he builds his kingdom.