

The following started out as the final paper for my social concerns class. It was structured academically but the challenges we face today require more than an academic response. While retaining the academic integrity of the paper I have expanded the content to include some quotes of contemporary authors and leaders.

In a time not so long ago on my 55th birthday I was watching Star Wars with some friends. The movie bears similarities to our world today. The battle of our time is not one of science fiction, yet it is the same battle of good, the Kingdom of God, versus the nationalistic and economic empire **in** the United States. The Divine power of the Kingdom of God is still on the side of Christians who choose to live as Jesus has called us: caring for the poor, the sick, widows and orphans, the vulnerable, the oppressed, the imprisoned, and the foreigner. The good versus evil choice is still ours to make - do we choose the Kingdom of God which means living the way Jesus calls us to live or do we choose nationalism and the empire of the United States over our Christian faith.

In 1977 as a seven-year-old boy I saw Star Wars in the theater. Good versus evil, the rebellion versus the empire, a timeless theme that is still true today. The same year in El Salvador, Jesuit Rutilio Grande was facing a similar battle. In El Salvador, there was an oligarchy, known as the 14 families, which ruled and oppressed the El Salvadoran people. In caring for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed he took a stand and was murdered for his convictions to live as Christ did.<sup>1</sup> "This was a time when **Institutional** violence was government sponsored and aimed at preserving the status quo."<sup>2</sup> During this time the United States was indirectly involved in oppressing the people of El Salvador and other Central American nations<sup>3</sup>. A few years later, Oscar Romero, the archbishop of El Salvador, who confronted the politically and financially powerful leaders, was also assassinated because he chose to prioritize his faith and the Gospel calling to care for the people Jesus personally ministered to while he was on earth. Social justice has become a **politized** term and yet social justice **IS** the call of Christ to all of His followers.

While researching this paper I came across this quote attributed to Jenifer *Nal band ian*.

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<sup>1</sup> (Kelly 2015, 132)

<sup>2</sup> (Kelly 2015, 1)

<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup> (Nangel 2008, 59)

“The Empire elevates the rich and forgets about the poor, teaching us to seek wealth above all else. The Empire teaches us to be selfish and self-serving, to be ruthless and violent to get what we want, and to oppress the poor and vulnerable in our pursuit of our own pleasure. The Kingdom stands in stark contrast to the Empire though. The Kingdom belongs to the poor and they are called blessed.<sup>4</sup> Those who live by Kingdom principles are loving, generous, and merciful, even to their enemies.<sup>5</sup> Those in the Kingdom do not take advantage of the vulnerable, but love the vulnerable as they love themselves.<sup>6</sup> The Kingdom is based on humbling yourself, rather than exalting yourself over others.<sup>7</sup>”<sup>8</sup>

End Quote

God created our world with the best of intentions but over the course of time there has been a shift from living the way Jesus calls us to live, a way of being, (orthopraxy) to a preoccupation with correct beliefs (orthodoxy). In the Gospels Jesus does not tell us what to believe but rather He **models** ‘right living.’ A way of living or being which is primarily social. Living the way Christ did is how we demonstrate our faith.

Worldwide there are 30,000 Christian denominations.<sup>9</sup> In the United States alone there are three major Lutheran denominations. Prior to the reformation there were primarily two Christian traditions: the Roman Catholic Church of the West and the Orthodox Church of the East. Prior to the great schism of 1054 there was primarily one Christian church with regional Bishops who met in Ecumenical councils to work out their differences. The causes of these progressive divisions are a topic for another day. This drift from orthopraxy to orthodoxy has resulted in a society preoccupied with whose beliefs are right while losing sight of *how* we should be living. It is not the spirit of God behind this divisiveness but the darkness of the deceiver.

The following is meant to address how we are called to live in a way that emphasizes the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and how it is a way of

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<sup>4</sup> (Luke 6:20)

<sup>5</sup> (Luke 6:35)

<sup>6</sup> (Leviticus 19:18,33-34)

<sup>7</sup> (Luke 14:7-14)

<sup>8</sup> (Nalbandian n.d.) It was too perfect to not quote in its entirety

<sup>9</sup> (Barna 2018)

being or living. Regardless of the readers denominational affiliation or faith tradition the words and actions of Jesus Christ in the Gospels offer a clear basis for our understanding of how we ought to live as Christ did. It is my view that interpretation of the rest of the New Testament should be considered in light of, or filtered through, the words and actions of Jesus in the Gospels.

To quote Rev. Mark Sandlin

"When interpreting the Bible, filter it through the larger biblical theology of "God is love." If where your **interpretation** ends up excludes, belittles, is violent, ignores those in need, or allows you to feel superior to others, it isn't loving. It isn't from love. It isn't of God."

End Quote

Another reason for sticking to the words of Jesus in the Gospels is because historically some non-gospel passages of scripture have been weaponized by our society as justification to pass judgement on others which only deepens our division.

Quoting C. S. Lewis

"It is Christ Himself, **not the Bible**, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of **good** teachers, will bring us to Him. We must not use the Bible as a sort of encyclopedia out of which texts can be taken for use as weapons."

End Quote

Later we will see how Jesus himself, the Son of God and the **only** rightful judge did not judge those he came in contact with. If God didn't send Jesus into the world to **condemn** it, I doubt he sent you. We will end with the final judgement but let's first begin with this passage on judgement: *"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?"*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 7:1-3 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

The hypocrites of today are not Scribes or Pharisees nor are they tithing mint, dill, and cumin but the result of our modern-day hypocrisy is the same where people neglect “the weightier matters of the law: **justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!**”<sup>11</sup> Also, similar to the Scribes and Pharisees there is a preoccupation in our society with being right or taking the divisive stance where our belief is the right way or only way. Jesus however is more concerned with how we care for others, right living, rather than right beliefs when he says, “**you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.**”<sup>12</sup>

Quoting Reverend Benjamin Cremer

“One of the most blatant forms of Christian hypocrisy in our time is Christians holding ordinary people accountable to the most rigid **moral** standards, while simultaneously holding their preferred politicians accountable to no standards at all.”

End Quote

“Individualism lies at the very core of American culture.”<sup>13</sup> However, Christianity is not an individual faith. Some Christian traditions cling to an idea of a **personal relationship** as being the **only** thing needed for salvation. However, the teachings of Jesus were not focused on an afterlife, eternity or heaven but rather the Kingdom of God on earth, right now.

The Lord’s prayer is in the **present** tense:

*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil:*

*For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.*

*Amen.*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 23:23-24 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 23:25 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

<sup>13</sup> Habits of the Heart p160

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 6:9-13 King James Version

The passage does not say **my** Father but **our** Father. The Kingdom is also in the **present tense**. In fact, there are numerous passages where Jesus refers to the Kingdom in the **present tense**.<sup>15</sup> Jesus appears to be less focused on an *afterlife* and more focused on how we are to live during our lifetime in His Kingdom on earth. Looking more deeply at Jesus teachings on how we should treat each other He says, “**Do to others as you would have them do to you**”<sup>16</sup> and similarly “**In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.**”<sup>17</sup>

Jesus’ preference for the poor and his teachings on wealth are clear. To the rich young ruler **who had kept the law** Jesus went on to say “**If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**”<sup>18</sup> This preference for the poor is found throughout the teachings and **actions** of Jesus. This response was recorded in other gospel accounts as well. The priorities of Jesus are not the rich and powerful but the poor and vulnerable. When you examine the life of Christ you see him moving towards the marginalized, poor, hungry, sick, and foreigner (remember the Samaritan woman.) What you **do not** see is Jesus regularly frequenting the homes of the wealthy and powerful.

Jesus speaks extensively of wealth in the bible and in every instance, he is not in favor of hoarding wealth but rather of giving it away for the benefit of others. In Matthew 6:24 he says “**No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.**” In a passage similar to the other rich young rulers Jesus again addresses the accumulation of wealth “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, **You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.**”<sup>19</sup> Further on Jesus goes on to say, “**It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.**”<sup>20</sup> One final passage to provide perspective on how Jesus viewed money “He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 4:17; Matthew 10:7; Luke 18:17; Luke 17:20-21; Mark 10:15

<sup>16</sup> Luke 6:31 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 7:12 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 19:21 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

<sup>19</sup> Mark 10:21 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

<sup>20</sup> Mark 10:25 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus’ teachings are contrary to the prosperity gospel found in the United States today.

For Jesus being a disciple was not complicated. He lays it out for us in Mark: “One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”<sup>22</sup> Our love for God is not exclusively in a personal relationship with Him. We reflect the love of God, the evidence of our relationship with God, in how we love our neighbor. Jesus makes it pretty clear who our neighbors are but let there be no doubt, again speaking on the subject of who is our neighbor, Jesus tells The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

The empire, the forces working against the Kingdom of God, have politicized social issues in order to keep us distracted and divided. It has become countercultural to set aside our personal, ethnic, political, and nationalistic, biases and choose to act in love. The forces of the empire, through the media, have used issues like immigration to keep us distracted from God’s call to care for migrants. Issues like abortion and human sexuality have been politicized to keep us divided and distracted. The empire has vilified welfare *programs* to take the focus off caring for the poor. The wealthy and powerful oligarchs in our nation have kept us distracted by these issues to keep us from realizing the extent to which **their hoarding of wealth** and abuse of power are exploiting the very people Jesus called us to care for. Is it that hard to understand that if it benefits the rich and powerful while making life more difficult for the poor and vulnerable, it contradicts everything Jesus taught?

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<sup>21</sup> Mark 12:41-44 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

<sup>22</sup> Mark 12:28-31 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Jesus spoke out against the dangers of money, hoarding wealth, and the abuse of power more than he ever spoke of human sexuality and sexual sins. Jesus does preach against adultery and other forms of sexual immorality, yet he showed grace and tenderness to those caught in sexual sin.<sup>23</sup> The forces of evil keep us preoccupied with *everyone else's* sins to keep us from being aware of our own. There is no example of Jesus calling us to *financial prosperity* in the gospel. But it is a narrative that suits the American social hunger for power, wealth, and dominion.

Quoting Scott Sauls

Quote

“If reading the Bible causes me to **scrutinize** others more than I scrutinize myself, then I am not reading the Bible correctly.”

End Quote

Judgement is in the hands of God and God alone. In Matthew 25:31-46 the condemned shall hear “**for I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.**” Then they also will answer, Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you? Then he will answer them, ‘**Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.**’<sup>24</sup>

Notice in the final judgement what we are **not** judged on: our Orthodoxy, patriotism, adherence to a particular doctrine or theology. No mention of gender, or gender identity, nation of origin, social status, class, ethnicity or immigration status. We will be judged on how we treat other people. How we live like Christ in the present time and participate in establishing the Kingdom of God in the world we live, *today*. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus doesn’t tell his followers what to believe but rather how to act. What we find in the gospels is a **way of being** which is what the earliest Christians knew as discipleship. “**I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**”<sup>25</sup> We demonstrate our love for Christ in how we live out the way he taught us to love one another.

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<sup>23</sup> Luke 16:18, Mark 7:21

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 25:42-45 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

<sup>25</sup> John 13:34-35 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Quoting Reverend Benjamin Cremer again:

When you demonize the immigrant, the poor, and the marginalized, I'm not interested in hearing about your religious beliefs. You've already shown me what they are by how you're treating the immigrant, the poor, and the marginalized.

End Quote

To this point I've user the Gospels as my guide for what it means to live like a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ with His words and examples as our guiding principles. How Jesus meant for us to live in our lifetimes and in His Kingdom on earth.

It is hard to be certain if our government leaders, **of either party**, are pulling the strings or simply pawns. One thing is clear, the billionaires who control the media stand to increase in power and wealth. Money and power, two things Jesus explicitly spoke against, are at the root of the darkness that divides us. The media controls the narrative they want us to hear. The following media moguls have a collective net worth nearly \$800 Billion with a B dollars:

Rupert Murdoch & family of News Corp / Fox News are worth \$23 BILLION  
Jeff Bezos of Amazon and the Washington Post is worth \$216 BILLION

Mark Zuckerberg of Meta and Facebook, is worth \$217 BILLION

Elon Musk of Twitter or X is worth \$342 BILLION . Or at least he was.

Consider this staggering fact: "just 8 men control as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population, roughly 3.6 billion people."<sup>26</sup> Wealth and power only serve to benefit the wealthy and powerful.

The United States is the last remaining global superpower. "We live in the most affluent society human history **has ever** known yet at the very same time that *literally billions of women and men around the world languish in hunger, poverty, and despair.*"<sup>27</sup> Our nation is truly a nation of empire.<sup>28</sup>

In this age of Empire, the organizations and the very values of what we profess as Christians have come under attack. False narratives regarding

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<sup>26</sup> (CBS News 2017)

<sup>27</sup> (Nangel 2008, 2)

<sup>28</sup> (Nangel 2008, xvii)

organizations like USAID or Lutheran Family Services are meant to grab headlines and **keep us distracted**, but they lack substance. We are faced with the choice of continually buying into the outrage or thinking for ourselves, gathering facts, and making **different decisions**.

Those of us in the United States live in a nation of deep division. There **appear** to be choices of **only** "either / or": Republican or Democrat, Conservative or Liberal, Right or Left.

We as a nation need to find a new way. A way that prioritizes our Christian faith putting the beliefs we profess into practice. Creating a **third way** that is not "either / or."

For those of us who profess to be followers of Christ, we are faced with a challenging decision. There is a prevalent nationalistic America first mindset. Do we live out our Christian convictions? Do we live the way Jesus taught us to live caring for the poor, the needy, the migrants, etc.? Do we prioritize the Kingdom of God, or do we prioritize the empire of the United States of America? They are incongruent with each other. We must make a choice. Our devotion to one will always be greater than the other.

Quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to **all** injustice, to **all** evil, to **all** lies to **all** oppression and violation of the weak and poor..."  
End Quote

We have been led to believe as a society that our options are binary: "either / or." We as a nation have been conditioned to quickly move to a polar extreme on any given subject. This is how even the church in America has become increasingly divided. We remain divided by the deceptive powers that have slowly crept into our lives and kept us distracted from the real issues. The Kingdom of God versus nationalism in the United States. To break the power of the empire Christians will need to prioritize acting and living as Christ commanded us. In doing so we create a third way. No longer of "either / or" but a moderate position where all sides come together. The time has come to prioritize our Christian faith over our nationalistic interests. Living in a countercultural way will be difficult and will look different from the rest of the world around us.

### Quoting Chuck Poole

"We sit down with and stand up for whoever is most marginalized, ostracized, stigmatized, demonized, dehumanized, shunned, slighted, left out and alone, not because we have made an ideological decision to be liberal or a political decision to be progressive but because we have made a spiritual decision to follow Jesus."

End Quote

As we were watching Star Wars on my 55<sup>th</sup> birthday my wife rather prophetically said "That will be you one day." When I later clarified the scene during which her prophetic utterance had occurred, and I was certain it was saving the princess or taking the shot that destroyed the Death star, she said, "It was when Princess Leia stood up to Grand Moff Tarkin and said, *'The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers.'*" It was not some valiant or heroic deed, but a stand against evil. A stand for the poor, the marginalized, oppressed, those who the empire tramples on in their pursuit of wealth, power, and dominion. Ours is not an intergalactic science fiction battle but one of the Kingdom of God vs the earthly empire in our country today. The choice to put **living** our Christian faith above our patriotic or nationalistic interests. A Christian faith that can be a source of unity in our deeply divided world.

I'm not looking for a hill to die on, but I have found the principles on which I will stand.

A timely quote from retired Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston

"Now is the moment for which a **lifetime** of faith has prepared you. All of those years of prayer and study, all of the worship services, all of the time devoted to a community of faith: it all comes down to this, this sorrowful moment when life seems chaotic, and the **anarchy of fear** haunts the thin borders of reason. Your faith has prepared you for this. It has given you the tools you need to respond: to **proclaim justice** while standing for **peace**. Long ago the Spirit called you to commit your life to faith. Now you know why. You are a source of strength for those who have lost hope. You are a voice of calm in the midst of chaos. You are a steady light in days of darkness. The time has come to be what you believe.

End Quote

“Though we may be divided by history, tradition, and practice, we choose to be united by our baptism in Christ.”

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