

Citizenship in heaven must impact citizenship here

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AUSTIN—Christians can change the world by practicing “radical obedience to Jesus,” Pastor Steve Bezner of Houston Northwest Baptist Church told participants at Christian Life Commission Advocacy Day in Austin.

“Jesus taught his disciples to pray, ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,’” said Bezner, author of *Your Jesus is Too American*. “‘On earth as it is in heaven’ is the shorthand definition for the kingship of Jesus—the kingdom of God.”

Positive change moves on two parallel rails—the gospel of the kingdom and the government, he said.

The church should consist of believers “living in a Jesus-centered community with an open heart for our world,” Bezner asserted.

“We should create a church community that is so compelling, people are drawn to be part of it,” he said.

The gospel message of salvation made possible in Christ should cause Christians to view the world differently and live a new reality, he insisted.

“Whenever we put on our gospel glasses, we finally see the world as God would have us see it,” Bezner said.

Living in radical obedience to Jesus according to the new reality of God’s kingdom means elevating service over power, diversity over division and intimacy over sex, he said.

Because not everyone will accept and acknowledge the kingship of Jesus,

government is a useful means to promote the common good and bring about positive change, he added.

Christians should speak truth to power prophetically rather than yielding to the temptation to “cozy up” to power, he insisted.

“The church’s first role is to stand up and speak up for those who don’t often have a voice and to do so in a way that may be unpopular with those who sit in cushy offices,” Bezner said.

In an American culture that values winning, Christians instead should focus on faithful service, he insisted.

‘Pilgrims as Citizens’

Julio Guarneri, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, discussed “Pilgrims as Citizens.” Guarneri worked from Hebrews 11 and 12 to demonstrate Christians are called to be nomads who rely on the supremacy of Jesus.

In circumstances that “may not look like what we thought God said he was going to do,” Guarneri said, “faith waits for God’s timing,” believing the future belongs to God.

“The early church faced suffering and persecution,” Guarneri noted. And it was to primarily Jewish-background congregations under Roman occupation the author of Hebrews writes.

In difficult circumstances, the author of Hebrews encourages the early church to remain faithful because “Jesus is better” than all things, including their plight.

The faithful witnesses of the past, listed in Hebrews 11, are to serve as exemplars, Guarneri noted.

In Hebrews 11:8-10, Abraham is described as a nomad, who lived in tents in a foreign land, called by God to go on a journey of faith to the land that eventually would be the promised land.

“The Bible tells us the children of Abraham are nomads. They admit that they are strangers and foreigners on Earth, looking for a better country.”

But, Guarneri noted, the destination, the city that endures, is not any earthly city. The final destination is the City of God.

The legacy for Abraham and Issac and Jacob, that of sojourner, is the same for anyone who has trusted Jesus, Guarneri said. “We hold loosely to our citizenship here on Earth, because our citizenship in heaven is better. ... We’re pilgrims marching on to Zion.”

However, citizenship in heaven doesn’t mean Christians “live irresponsibly” here, Guarneri said. “On the contrary, because we know our destiny, then we can make a great difference here.”

Citizens of a heavenly kingdom should be the best citizens here, Guarneri said.

“Because we are pilgrims” and sojourners, “we identify” with the Hebrew people in the Old Testament, the struggling Jewish church in the first century, Baptist forefathers and mothers—who were forced to be on the move from persecution—and migrant people of today, Guarneri asserted.

“Our entire biblical and Baptist legacy is tied to a migrating people. That should mean something to us,” Guarneri said, noting that doesn’t mean not securing borders or caring for the rule of law.

But, it should mean caring for sojourners and identifying with those who are on pilgrimage.

“When a marginalized group grows in power and influence, it should never

become the bully. Jesus is better,” he continued.

In Hebrews 12:2, “our attention turns to the main character of the sermon ... fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorned its shame, and sat down at the right hand of Jesus.”

As dual-citizens, the supreme exemplar Jesus shows that while the kingdom of God’s end outcome is success, suffering is the path to that victory, he said.

“When we fix our eyes on Jesus, we see a king on a throne, but we also see a cross.”

If Jesus didn’t avoid pain and suffering, “neither will we.” And, God will use suffering, “to shape us into Christ-likeness” and “make us holy.”

Today’s Christians want to be respected and “wield our power to show the world that we are better than them. That’s not the way of Jesus,” he observed.

Pilgrim-citizens should live in a way that draws people to Christ and makes them want to know why Jesus’ followers are so different.

Jesus not only finished the race victoriously, he also made it possible for Christ-followers to reach the reward. We can begin to build now something we know God will make reality, he concluded.

Jesus’ stump speech

Tim Alberta, author of *American Carnage* and *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, gave the final keynote address.

Alberta began by explaining he’s gotten to know Texas well in the past few years, since about 1 in 3 of the talks he’s been asked to give since his books

were published have been here.

Alberta said in the time he's spent in Texas over the past decade writing his books and working as a political journalist, he's observed a particular emphasis on toughness and bravado is required for political campaigning in the state.

While politics throughout the country have seen culture, theology and politics become enmeshed, Texas politics are extra "gritty," he noted. So, he suggested, the "stump speech" of Jesus, found in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount, seems particularly difficult to reconcile in Texas.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit," and the other beatitudes and imperatives that follow, would have a political rally audience squirming, Alberta said.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lists examples of how his instructions for his followers differ from what they believed was required of them, he pointed out.

"You've been told to 'love your neighbor and hate your enemies,' and I tell you to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you."

But, Alberta suggested, it's important to consider how the entire story of humanity's relationship to God in Scripture, from the Garden of Eden all the way to the Ascension, to present day is one of our continually misinterpreting and misunderstanding what it is we are called to be.

In "lowest common denominator politics" that leave no room for mercy or grace, Christians must ask "who we're called to be," he said.

Alberta noted Micah 6:8 makes God's requirements so clear, he believes "we will be judged" for failing to follow them.

"We waited for a conqueror, and we got a child," he said. "Are we still, today, misreading who God is calling us to be?"

Believers always have struggled with living out being a citizen of another world while still living in this one.

But, he urged, the Matthew 5 “stump speech can be yours” and the transformative power of the gospel will help Christians get that proportionality right.

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp