

Political journalist insists: ‘It doesn’t have to be this way’

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(WACO)—Two months before November elections, Tim Alberta challenged a packed house in the Armstrong Browning Library on the Baylor University campus in Waco to trust in God and stop failing the test.

Alberta is a staff writer for *The Atlantic* and *New York Times* bestselling author of *American Carnage* and *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*.

“We are here to discuss the crisis in the American church,” Alberta began. But, he pointed out, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

So, the things the white evangelical church in America is dealing with right now really span all the way back to the 4th century with Constantinople and earlier.

Even though it may feel new now, Alberta said, God’s people have been dealing with the pitfalls contributing to the current crisis among evangelicals a long time—so long, it’s a story woven all through the Old and New Testaments.

While Alberta acknowledged it is not only evangelical white American Christians who are struggling, this is the tradition he is part of and knows best. So, when he speaks of the “American church,” white evangelicals are who he means, he explained.

A church in crisis

The American church has become, “in some ways, every bit a secularist’s fever dream—hateful, bullying, hypocritical—more consumed with winning

the culture wars than with promoting peace on earth and goodwill toward men.”

“We have acted and spoken in ways that bleed the church of its credibility, while diminishing its capacity to evangelize a world that is unbelieving and desperately in need of Christ,” Alberta said.

“The stench of scandal and the lack of accountability that perpetuates it drags the precious name of Jesus through the mud.”

Alberta lamented the damage that has been done to churches “crumbling under the weight of political strife. The Lamb of God is being appropriated as a mascot for the elephants, and in some cases for the donkeys, too.”

He described pastors who have treated their pulpits as “cable news sets” to “weaponize the word of God to justify their lust for worldly idols, grafting the enduring power of the gospel onto their ephemeral obsession with winning elections,” subjugating their enemies, and imposing a version of Christianity focused on strength and status.

Alberta pointed out this religion they promote includes none of the “self-sacrificial love that turns enemies into friends, friends into brothers and brothers into co-heirs of the kingdom of God,” which is terrible news.

Alberta suggested that to consider this bad news, however, requires a turning to the good news.

The unexpected, “insane” truth that almighty God chose to be “humbled, even humiliated in ways that we cannot fathom,” giving up his majesty and glory to be dishonored on a cross, and that cross would someday become a profound symbol of victory, must be part of the conversation.

The Three 'Ts'

Then, Alberta got to his main point—"The Three 'Ts' that we face inside the church today and has us in crisis—the temptation, the threat and the test." He said he would "attempt to discuss the nature of following Jesus and why it is so difficult, where we go wrong and how we might do better."

"All of us, myself included" face these obstacles, even Jesus' closest followers.

Turning to Luke 4 and Jesus' temptation, Alberta noted the synoptic Gospels introduce Jesus as an adult in this story, where he is offered the world by Satan.

Jesus responds to the temptation of worldly power with the words: "Get thee behind me, Satan. For it is written, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and serve him only."

But Simon, later named Peter, offers a foil to this response by Jesus, Alberta said. Peter was looking for a Messiah who would return the kingdom of Israel to a place of prominence. He hated the oppressive, occupying Roman forces and wanted them defeated.

"Simon ... was obsessed with making Israel great again" and restoring worldly power, Alberta said.

Yet Jesus proclaims a new kingdom is here, the kingdom of God. Simon, in following Jesus, comes to understand—and answers Jesus when he is asked in Matthew—that Jesus is the Son of God, no doubt hoping, even expecting, to stand beside Christ and reign, Alberta continued.

But the problem is, Peter does not understand what the kingdom of heaven is all about, Alberta said. Because when Jesus began to explain that he will go to Jerusalem to be killed, "Peter pulls Jesus aside and begins to rebuke

him,” and says never, never will this happen.

What does Jesus say in response, Alberta asked, but the same words he’d spoken at his temptation: “Get behind me Satan.”

Jesus addressed Peter in this way because “Peter is flirting with the same temptation”—the temptation to rule the world, to focus on the here and now, Alberta said.

“Peter was pursuing victory in this world, while Jesus was pursuing victory over this world,” Alberta stated.

The American church, Alberta suggested, struggles with this same temptation and perhaps even more so because it believes, as does Alberta, “that we are blessed ... and when you believe that we are blessed ... be careful, because those blessings, pretty quickly, pretty quietly can become indistinguishable from entitlements.”

The threat was real, Alberta said. The Jewish culture was under attack. All around them there seemed to be a coordinated assault on their faith and the traditional values of Israel. He said he could sympathize with their hope for a Messiah who would come to eliminate the threat.

They wanted a “political strongman” to come do whatever needed to be done to set everything right, Alberta continued. “Desperate times call for desperate measures. The ends justify the means, don’t they?”

The arc of Peter’s life shows his struggle with the temptation to pursue worldly power and eliminate the threat to his people, God’s people, Alberta said.

But with Jesus, the means matter very much, Alberta contended. Only by the spotless Lamb of God could the salvation of the world be attended to.

Jesus promised his followers not worldly success or power, but hardship

and pain. The trials Peter faced, he often failed. But in his letters, Peter's words are "almost unrecognizable."

In 1 Peter, he tells his audience they are exiles, blessed despite threats. They can withstand the temptations and threats, because through Jesus they are now co-heirs to an otherworldly kingdom.

Good news/bad news

Alberta said Peter is presenting a good news/bad news scenario: "The good news is the kingdom and the power and the glory that belongs to God can be ours also. The bad news is it's not free, and it's not easy. It requires suffering. It requires fiery ordeals. We will be tested."

"We think so much about the ends justifying the means," Alberta said, but "we are being tested."

The means matter—the Christian response to testing brings them closer to Jesus and demonstrates to those outside the faith the validity of Christianity. The early Christians' faithfulness under trials facilitated Christianity's growth, Alberta explained.

Alberta said the American church today is again being tested, tempted under threat to cling to power, "and we are failing."

But it doesn't need to be this way. Christians can fix their eyes on the eternal, seeing themselves as exiles here and citizens of another kingdom.

"Let God handle these big, thorny, scary problems," he said. Instead, focus on how these challenges or threats actually are opportunities to draw closer to Jesus and share him with others.