

Texas Baptist professors denounce political sins and confess complicity

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More than two-dozen faculty and staff at six Texas Baptist universities joined 1,100 other Christian scholars who signed a statement of confession and commitment denouncing a political environment “marked by fear, polarization and violence.”

“The current political climate reveals longstanding national sins of racism, misogyny, nativism and great economic disparity,” says the “confessing faculty” [statement](#), an expanded version of a document originally drafted by faculty and staff at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago and Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif.

‘Privilege and power’

The scholars who signed the statement identify as “Christian faculty members of institutions of higher education who represent varying degrees of privilege and power,” but they make clear they are speaking as individuals, not as institutional representatives.

“A large portion of our communities is weeping,” the statement says. “The fear of deportation is real. The anxiety of being assaulted is real. The fear of being forgotten or mistreated is real. Many people of color, women and other marginalized groups feel increasingly alienated not only in the current national context but in much of the white evangelical culture as well. Acknowledging that pain and woundedness may take many forms, we humbly entreat Christian communities to seek healing, reconciliation and justice.

“Regardless of where Christians stand politically, the gospel demands we recognize vulnerable populations among us. The gospel also demands that Christians recognize ways we benefit from and participate in structural injustices. Ignoring policies that denigrate and even endanger vulnerable groups is not a faithful option, even if privilege allows some to do so. When we have power, we are called to use it justly and for the good of all.”

‘God first’ not ‘America first’

Roger Olson, the Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary, said he endorsed the statement because the nation faces a moment of potential crisis “in which America could possibly go completely wrong in terms of empire and misusing God to justify ‘America first.’”

“As Christians, even American Christians, we ought to say, ‘God first’ and ‘America insofar as it is with God’—not assuming that God is with us in whatever we do just because we are America,” Olson said.

“That was the mistake Israel and Judah made—assuming God was on their side, regardless of their obedience to God’s way. The prophets spoke into that decision of crisis and reminded Israel and Judah that God requires mercy over sacrifice—obedience to God’s way over lip service.”

Confession and penitence

The statement includes confessions of failure “in calling out injustice, in loving and knowing our neighbors, and in properly stewarding God’s creation.”

“We pray for genuine conviction to undo the harm we have caused,” the statement says.

Myles Werntz, who holds the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at

Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary, said he was drawn to the statement by "the penitent nature of it."

"As Christian educators, it is essential for us to model not only the proper confidence of the faith, but also the penitence of it—that we aspire to be emissaries of God's grace, but often do so in ways which are convenient and not at all costly to us," Werntz said. "The statement is a vision of charity amidst differing political positions, of reasoned discourse, and of unity in an age of divisive soundbites."

'Radical commitment to truth'

Bob Ellis, associate dean for academics at Logsdon Seminary, noted he would have phrased a few points differently, but overall the statement "offers a profound commitment to particular values I think are under assault in our day."

Ellis particularly noted the statement on truth, which says: "As Christian educators, we affirm our deep resolve to pursue truth, to reason carefully and to rely on sound evidence. While we 'see through a glass darkly' ([1 Corinthians 13:12](#)), we stand resolutely against any falsehood that seeks to undermine truth and any propaganda intended to obscure it."

"Some in our culture who have loud voices seem to think that opinion which is neither rational or verifiable is somehow as valid as truth," Ellis said. "Such a view is threat to our society and an affront to the gospel."

While he also affirmed the statements of commitment to the vulnerable and marginalized, he particularly noted his appreciation for the statement's emphasis on confession.

"We who are Christian educators have also failed at times to pursue a radical commitment to truth, and we fail all too often to show compassion for the marginalized in our actions, as well as our words," he said. "We,

along with the rest of the church, need a recommitment to truth and compassion.”

Other faculty and staff from Hardin-Simmons University who endorsed the statement are Rick Hammer and Teresa Ellis.

‘Too long in coming’

Barry Harvey, professor of theology at Baylor University, insisted the affirmations in the faculty statement “have been too long in coming.”

Harvey cited the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which Martin Luther King Jr., pointed to a time “when the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion,” but rather when people in power accused Christians of being agitators and “disturbers of the peace.”

He also pointed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words that in assessing what is just or unjust, “the community of the faithful ... is not bound by political or national ties.”

“It is instead the obligation we have, not just to Jesus Christ, but to our sisters and brothers and to all human beings, that ultimately binds our minds and hearts,” Harvey said.

Other Baylor faculty and staff who endorsed the statement are Natalie Carnes, Christopher Hansen, Moises Park, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Lynn Whitcomb, Robert Woodberry, David Sherwood, Ellen Hampton Filgo, Tiffany Hogue, Pete Ramsey and Elise Edwards.

Derek Hatch from Howard Payne University also signed the statement, as did three East Texas Baptist University faculty members—Gerald Nissley, Robert Benefield and Troy Ladine. Three Houston Baptist University faculty members—Curtis Henderson, Mary Osterloh and Brenda Whaley—endorsed

the statement, and two Wayland Baptist University professors—Jerry Faught and Peter Bowen—signed it.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Derek Hatch was named associate professor of religion and endowed chair of Baptist Studies at Georgetown College in September 2020.