

Willimon: Christians called to faithful presence, not conquest

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WACO—Christians who want to change the world should make sure their actions are done not only in the name of Jesus, but also in the way of Jesus, pastoral theologian Will Willimon told a conference at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary.

"The cross is the sign of how God changes the world—not by power and might, but by suffering, sacrificial, nonviolent love," said Willimon, bishop for the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church.

"Are Christians Called to Change the World?" was the theme of the symposium, cosponsored by Baylor's Center for Ministry Effectiveness and Educational Leadership and by Truett Seminary's Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching.

Willimon and speakers who followed him responded to an assertion by James Davison Hunter in his recent book, *To Change the World*, that culture may resist the frontal assaults of those who seek to impose their will on others, but it can be transformed by the "faithful presence" of committed believers.

The attractive call to be a part of "a world-changing enterprise" cuts across denominational lines, Willimon noted, but Hunter offers a corrective word. Rather than embracing language of "conquest and domination," Christians should focus less on winning culture wars and more on bearing faithful witness, Hunter maintains.

“Are Christians called to change to world? Unequivocally, yes. This is, sometimes. Well, sort of,” Willimon said.

In a sinful, fallen world, even the best intentions of religious people fall short, he noted.

“In a sense, transforming the world is Jesus’ job. We’ve got a bad record. Some of the worst stuff we’ve done has been in the name of changing the world,” Willimon said.

Christians should be good citizens and make their views known in the political sphere, he said, but they should not confuse the nations of this world with the kingdom of God.

“We are called to witness that God, not nations, rule the world,” he said.

The main way Christians change the world may be through faithful witness expressed in love and humility in the context of local churches, Willimon urged. If Christians are going to seek to transform the world, let it be done God’s way, as revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus.

“Jesus is the face of God,” he said. “Jesus is how God looks and talks and acts.”

Living out the calling of faithful presence can be challenging for pastors who try to communicate a gospel message to church members who interpret every word through the filter of their own political and economic biases or personal agendas, said George Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, one of three panelists who responded to Willimon.

“We always wrestle with people who would want to co-opt the church,” he said.

Love for God and love for neighbor—not conquest and domination—should guide individual Christians and churches, said Diana Garland, dean of the

Baylor School of Social Work.

“We are transformed by caring for neighbors,” she said. “It is the living of love that changes us. Sometimes, God uses us to transform. But it’s almost never something our pea-brains would have figured out on our own.”

Perhaps rather than viewing transformation in terms of conquest and domination, Christians should “embrace the language of resurrection,” said Chris Seay, pastor of Ecclesia Church in Houston.

“‘Faithful presence’ sounds a bit boring to me,” Seay confessed, unless it means joining in God’s creative work of restoring what is broken.

But if faithful presence means embracing the way of Christ—the way of the self-sacrificial love that leads to resurrection—that becomes a worthy challenge, he said: “To go on an adventure to experience faithful presence so radical it often will be painful.”