

Guest editorial: Remain true to Christ, not America's god

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At the end of last year, and through early this year, reports went out about the Baptist General Convention of Texas' decision to place three churches—Wilshire Baptist in Dallas, Lakeshore Baptist in Waco, and First Baptist Church in Austin—out of harmonious cooperation.

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None of those churches wanted that to happen, but they all felt called to be LGBT-welcoming and -affirming congregations in the midst of a church culture that instead of befriending and accompanying, has been marked by its condemning record. But the Texas Baptist body simply could not move on, and because it wanted to follow its interpretation of Scripture and the decisions of previous years—1982, 1992, 2005 and 2009 and then again in 2016—the majority voted to place those churches out of harmonious cooperation.

Today, the conservative Evangelical group seems to have bitten the bait. Donald Trump sold a false idea of perceived persecution, and he promised liberation to a country identified as the New Jerusalem.

Goes both ways

It would be such a relief if this interaction simply came from one side, the side of those in power. But the bad news for the church is that the interaction goes both ways. Pastors and church leaders have been asking for liberation through the hands of government. They see this country and its governors as if they were the very kingdom Christ spoke of.

All of this expressed itself more completely shortly before Independence Day. On June 25, First Baptist Church of Dallas held the Freedom Celebration on its grounds. The congregation sang to the United States, and an Army ranger preached a sermon using military references. At the end of that week, the church's choir, along with its pastor, Robert Jeffress, joined Donald Trump at Kennedy Center in Washington to, once again, celebrate the country they believe Christ has called to be that "city on a hill."

What is our goal? And what is our understanding of the call Christ has given us?

Important questions

These are the questions I ask when I see a group of Baptists—people who claim to be followers of Christ—so willing to cut fellowship with others over a disagreement regarding the interpretation of Scriptures but remaining mute about idolatry to an American god. It is almost as if this were a chosen ignorance. And because the actions of several churches and their convention seem to point to that conclusion, we have to ask: What is our goal? If we are willing to sacrifice fellowship over our understanding of sexuality but not over the name and nature of Christ, then what is it that guides our path?

A recent liturgical Gospel reading was from Matthew 10:37-42. At the beginning of that passage, Jesus tells the disciples if they are going to follow him, they must be willing to give up on their parents and their children. "Those who love them more than they love me," Jesus says, "are not worthy of being my disciples."

This is the "kingdom of heaven," the one Jesus has called us to announce, one that is placed above everything else because its King is to be placed above anything else. When our faith tells us these mortal and fleeting

institutes are nearly at the same level as the Creator of everything that created them, then we clearly are missing the point. When we are willing to cut fellowship with others over their way to show Christ but maintain fellowship with those who show a false Christ, then who is our Lord? Our history of actions taken over other churches? Our interpretation of the Bible? Or our American church culture?

The kingdom is for ...

The kingdom is for those in need of hope, no matter their interpretation of Scripture on whether the LGBT community should be part of our fellowship or not. But there is no kingdom waiting for the followers of the American Christ, because that Christ has never been real.

May the church remember who alone is the One who called it. Christ has called the church, not America, to be that city on a hill. And when that kingdom is finalized, we will see this country had nothing to do with the magnificent and ultimate act of God.

So, let us remain faithful to that Christ and to those who also find themselves to be disciples of that one and true Christ, no matter their view on a few passages of Scripture.

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