

Voices: Learning to say Yes and No to the world

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In reading Psalm 1 recently, I was reminded how Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the great bulk of the Christian life as one of diaspora, in which we are scattered out into the world. Most Christians do not work in churches or, as I do, in educational institutions that train ministers; we do not spend most of our waking hours in close proximity to church members or in celebration of the word. And so, with the Psalmist, we must ask ourselves what it means to be a Christian in the world, when we are, in fact, sitting in the seat of mockers most of our lives (Psalm 1:3).



Myles Werntz To do this well requires, to paraphrase the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, to be able to say both Yes and No well. We must, as Christians, say Yes to the world, for it is this world which God has created, loved, atoned for and one day will re-create. Accordingly, our answer to the world cannot be a resounding No. As Christians, we live in the world as those seeking another city, but also as those committed, in hope, to God's future for creation.

But neither can our witness be without a No. As those committed to the person and way of Jesus Christ, there are acts and ways that appear now as

shadows, negative images in light of the Light of the world. And to be a Christian is to acknowledge that, while there is a great deal Christians should be saying Yes to, every Yes entails a subsequent No. To say Yes to the Lord of Creation is to say No to all other lords.

Say and do



This, of course, is easier said than done.

As [Jason Mahn recently wrote](#), we are Christians living, for the most part, in Christendom. Our country is not a theocracy, and our incoming president has evinced no interest in enacting those kinds of reforms. But we live in a world that, for the most part, recognizes Christianity as the default faith, even where there is no faith to be found. Christianity is in the air we breathe, whether or not we are holding our breath. Whether one confesses the faith or not, Christianity remains the de facto assumption.

It's complicated

For the Christian, then, following Christ becomes complicated. Saying Yes to Christ will mean saying Yes to things our Christ-haunted culture sees as the exception, the extreme and the abandoned. It will mean taking on guilt, dining with sinners, letting our feet be washed by those who use their own clothes as towels. It will mean saying Yes to possibilities that have been forgotten to history books and fairy tales.

This Yes will bring with it certain Nos, although to be certain, not every No we wish to utter is the one God would have us utter: There are calls of discipleship we always will want to refuse under cover of inconvenience

that are the call of Christ nonetheless. But saying Yes to Christ in spaces where we find Christianity the de facto position will mean at times saying No to those safe spaces. It will mean refusing cheap grace in favor of a costly one, as well as taking up a cross when we would rather put it down. It will mean refusing the safety of being the majority.

Christians have been offered safety and protection, a great freedom to remain the majority and to have their interests protected. And it is precisely now when relearning discipleship involves both a Yes and a No matters.

The danger facing Christians in America is not that we will never confess the faith, but that it is too easy now to confess. The challenge for Christians is to say Yes and No in ways that exceed the low bar, that even in a place where Christianity is assumed, we might be Christians.

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