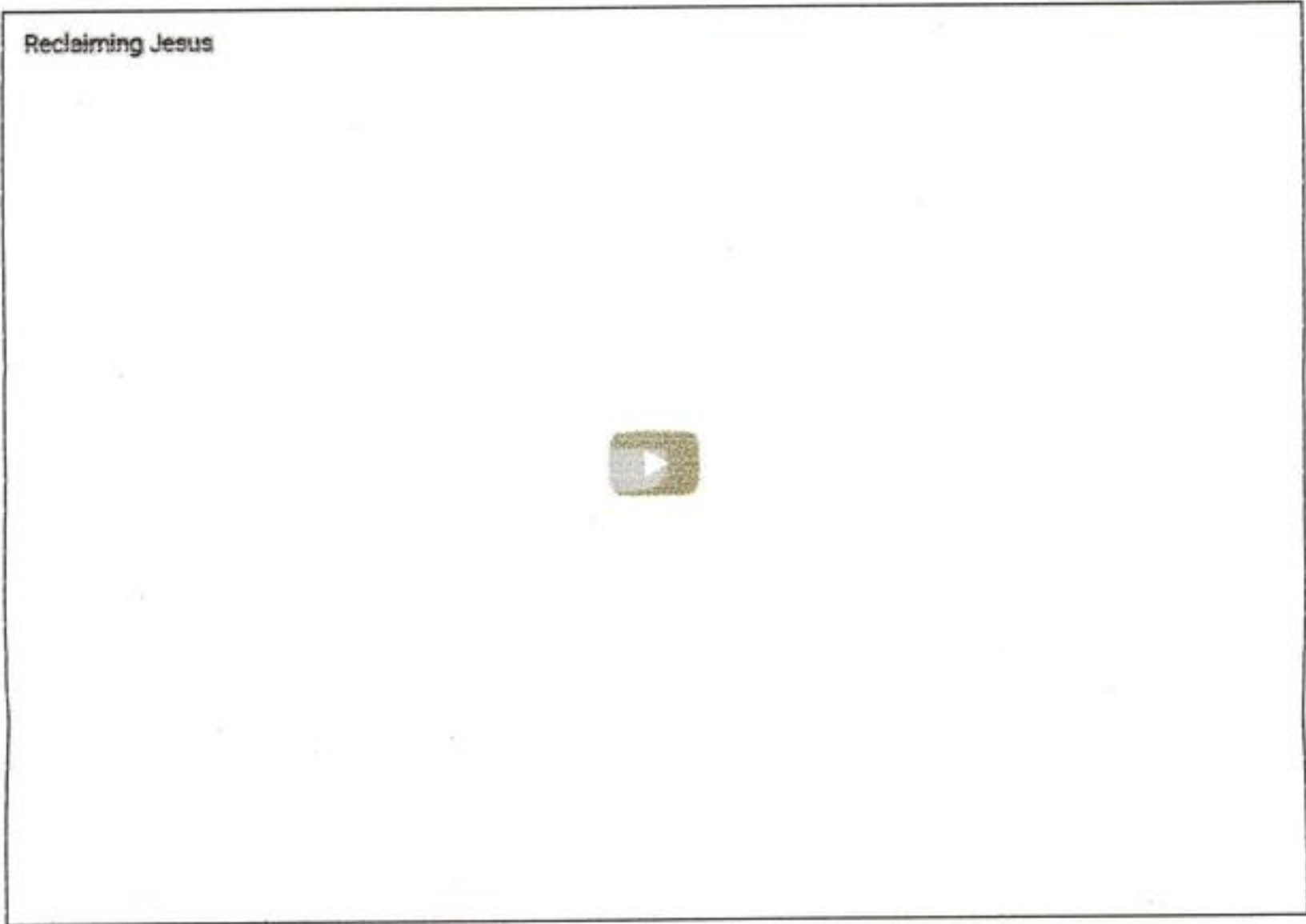


Reclaiming Jesus



We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.

It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography—our identity in Christ precedes every other identity. We pray that our nation will see Jesus’ words in us. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

When politics undermines our theology, we must examine that politics. The church's role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government's role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace, rewarding good behavior while restraining bad behavior (Romans 13). When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state."

It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them. We do so here with humility, prayer, and a deep dependency on the grace and Holy Spirit of God.

This letter comes from a retreat on Ash Wednesday, 2018. In this season of Lent, we feel deep lamentations for the state of our nation, and our own hearts are filled with confession for the sins we feel called to address. The true meaning of the word repentance is to turn around. It is time to lament, confess, repent, and turn. In times of crisis, the church has historically learned to return to Jesus Christ.

Jesus is Lord. That is our foundational confession. It was central for the early church and needs to again become central to us. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not—nor any other political ruler since. If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute. Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God he announced, is the Christian's first loyalty, above all others. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Our faith is personal but never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth.

The question we face is this: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What does our loyalty to Christ, as disciples, require at this moment in our history? We believe it is time to renew our theology of public discipleship and witness. Applying what "Jesus is Lord" means today is the message we commend as elders to our churches.

What we believe leads us to what we must reject. Our "Yes" is the foundation for our "No." What we confess as our faith leads to what we confront. Therefore, we offer the following six affirmations of what we believe, and the resulting rejections of practices and policies by political leaders which dangerously corrode the soul of the nation and deeply threaten the public integrity of our faith. We pray that we, as followers of Jesus, will find the depth of faith to match the danger of our political crisis.

I. WE BELIEVE each human being is made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). That image and likeness confers a divinely decreed dignity, worth, and God-given equality to all of us as children of the one God who is the Creator of all things. Racial bigotry is a brutal denial of the image of God (the *imago dei*) in some of the children of God. Our participation in the global community of Christ absolutely prevents any toleration of racial bigotry. Racial justice and healing are biblical and theological issues for us, and are central to the mission of the body of Christ in the world. We give thanks for the prophetic role of the historic black churches in America when they have called for a more faithful gospel.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership. We, as followers of Jesus, must clearly reject the use of racial bigotry for political gain that we have seen. In the face of such bigotry, silence is complicity. In particular, we reject white supremacy and commit ourselves to help dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate white preference and advantage. Further, any doctrines or political strategies that use racist resentments, fears, or language must be named as public sin—one that goes back to the foundation of our nation and lingers on. Racial bigotry must be antithetical for those belonging to the body of Christ, because it denies the truth of the gospel we profess.

II. WE BELIEVE we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, identity, or class (Galatians 3:28). The body of Christ, where those great human divisions are to be overcome, is meant to be an example for the rest of society. When we fail to overcome these oppressive obstacles, and even perpetuate them, we have failed in our vocation to the world—to proclaim and live the reconciling gospel of Christ.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women that has been further revealed in our culture and politics, including our churches, and the oppression of any other child of God. We lament when such practices seem publicly ignored, and thus privately condoned, by those in high positions of leadership. We stand for the respect, protection, and affirmation of women in our families, communities, workplaces, politics, and churches. We support the courageous truth-telling voices of women, who have helped the nation recognize these abuses. We confess sexism as a sin, requiring our repentance and resistance.

III. WE BELIEVE how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. (Matthew 25: 31-46) "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." God calls us to protect and seek justice for those who are poor and vulnerable, and our treatment of people who are

"oppressed," "strangers," "outsiders," or otherwise considered "marginal" is a test of our relationship to God, who made us all equal in divine dignity and love. Our proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ is at stake in our solidarity with the most vulnerable. If our gospel is not "good news to the poor," it is not the gospel of Jesus Christ (Luke 4:18).

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable children of God. We strongly deplore the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees, who are being made into cultural and political targets, and we need to remind our churches that God makes the treatment of the "strangers" among us a test of faith (Leviticus 19:33-34). We won't accept the neglect of the well-being of low-income families and children, and we will resist repeated attempts to deny health care to those who most need it. We confess our growing national sin of putting the rich over the poor. We reject the immoral logic of cutting services and programs for the poor while cutting taxes for the rich. Budgets are moral documents. We commit ourselves to opposing and reversing those policies and finding solutions that reflect the wisdom of people from different political parties and philosophies to seek the common good. Protecting the poor is a central commitment of Christian discipleship, to which 2,000 verses in the Bible attest.

IV. WE BELIEVE that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Truth-telling is central to the prophetic biblical tradition, whose vocation includes speaking the Word of God into their societies and speaking the truth to power. A commitment to speaking truth, the ninth commandment of the Decalogue, "You shall not bear false witness" (Exodus 20:16), is foundational to shared trust in society. Falsehood can enslave us, but Jesus promises, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32). The search and respect for truth is crucial to anyone who follows Christ.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life. Politicians, like the rest of us, are human, fallible, sinful, and mortal. But when public lying becomes so persistent that it deliberately tries to change facts for ideological, political, or personal gain, the public accountability to truth is undermined. The regular purveying of falsehoods and consistent lying by the nation's highest leaders can change the moral expectations within a culture, the accountability for a civil society, and even the behavior of families and children. The normalization of lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of society. In the face of lies that bring darkness, Jesus is our truth and our light.

V. WE BELIEVE that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination. Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles (the world) lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:25-26). We believe our elected officials are called to public service, not public tyranny, so we must protect the limits, checks, and balances of democracy and encourage humility and civility on the part of elected officials. We support democracy, not because we believe in human perfection, but because we do not. The authority of government is instituted by God to order an unredeemed society for the sake of justice and peace, but ultimate authority belongs only to God.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule. We believe authoritarian political leadership is a theological danger that threatens democracy and the common good—and we will resist it. Disrespect for the rule of law, not recognizing the equal importance of our three branches of government, and replacing civility with dehumanizing hostility toward opponents are of great concern to us. Neglecting the ethic of public service and accountability, in favor of personal recognition and gain often characterized by offensive arrogance, are not just political issues for us. They raise deeper concerns about political idolatry, accompanied by false and unconstitutional notions of authority.

VI. WE BELIEVE Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples (Matthew 28:18). Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries. The most well-known verse in the New Testament starts with "For God so loved the world" (John 3:16). We, in turn, should love and serve the world and all its inhabitants, rather than seek first narrow, nationalistic prerogatives.

THEREFORE, WE REJECT "America first" as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal. We reject domination rather than stewardship of the earth's resources, toward genuine global development that brings human flourishing for all of God's children. Serving our own communities is essential, but the global connections between us are undeniable. Global poverty, environmental damage, violent conflict, weapons of mass destruction, and deadly diseases in some places ultimately affect all places, and we need wise political leadership to deal with each of these.

WE ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED for the soul of our nation, but also for our churches and the integrity of our faith. The present crisis calls us to go deeper—deeper into our relationship to God; deeper into our relationships with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; deeper into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk.

The church is always subject to temptations to power, to cultural conformity, and to racial, class, and gender divides, as Galatians 3:28 teaches us. But our answer is to be “in Christ,” and to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable, and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2)

The best response to our political, material, cultural, racial, or national idolatries is the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Jesus summarizes the Greatest Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:38). As to loving our neighbors, we would add “no exceptions.”

We commend this letter to pastors, local churches, and young people who are watching and waiting to see what the churches will say and do at such a time as this.

Our urgent need, in a time of moral and political crisis, is to recover the power of confessing our faith. Lament, repent, and then repair. If Jesus is Lord, there is always space for grace. We believe it is time to speak and to act in faith and conscience, not because of politics, but because we are disciples of Jesus Christ—to whom be all authority, honor, and glory. It is time for a fresh confession of faith. Jesus is Lord. He is the light in our darkness. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

- Bishop Carroll A. Baltimore, President and CEO, Global Alliance Interfaith Network
- Rev. Dr. Peter Borgdorff, Executive Director Emeritus, Christian Reformed Church in North America
- Dr. Amos Brown, Chair, Social Justice Commission, National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.
- Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, Professor Emeritus, Columbia Theological Seminary
- Dr. Tony Campolo, Co-Founder, Red Letter Christians
- Dr. Iva Carruthers, General Secretary, Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference
- The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church
- Rev. Dr. James Forbes, President and Founder, Healing of the Nations Foundation and Preaching Professor at Union Theological Seminary
- Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, General Secretary Emeritus, Reformed Church in America
- Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hale, Senior Pastor, Ray of Hope Christian Church, Decatur, GA
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- Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., Co-Convener National African American Clergy Network
- Dr. John Perkins, Chair Emeritus and Founding Member, Christian Community Development Association and President Emeritus, John & Vera Mae Perkins Foundation
- Senior Bishop Lawrence Reddick, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
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Featured Alumni

Dr. Terri Leclerq

June 2018

Texas State alumna Dr. Terri Leclerq didn't consider herself an activist when she heard about the torture techniques being taught inside the U.S. Army School of the Americas, but she felt compelled to do something about it. In 1998, she and her daughter flew to Fort Benning, Georgia to join four hundred and sixty-four other people to peacefully protest. "We filed in two by two, walked into an open army post, and were arrested for trespassing

on a military installation," says Dr. Leclerq. Sixteen of them, not including Dr. Leclerq or her daughter, were sentenced to six months in a federal penitentiary.

Letters from those imprisoned described inhumane conditions, including denied access to medication and punishment by being fed a diet of "green loaf," a mix of vegetables and food scraps that met the minimum dietary requirements while being nearly inedible. When Dr. Leclerq, a professor of Legal Writing at UT in Austin, read these letters, she decided to write



a Law Review article to expose these injustices. She spent years studying the Prison Litigation Reform Act and trying to understand the cases that litigated it. Upon its publication, she realized that people who taught Criminal Law already knew about the issues in prison litigation. Her article wasn't helping those who needed it most.

To reach that ignored audience, she decided to cut her forty-page legal article down to a more accessible graphic novel. "I turned it into a graphic novel to teach the inmates. They're the ones who needed to know this stuff," she says. However, this decision posed a new challenge: Dr. Leclerq had little idea what a graphic novel was, let alone how to create one. Fueled by her conviction that she could change the world, one she realized during her time on the Student Senate while earning her undergraduate degree at Texas State, she set out on a decade-long project to create what would eventually become *Prison Grievances*.

First, she had to determine what exactly a graphic novel was, and then she enlisted the help of a student at LBJ to learn how to format one like a screenplay. After it was written, there was the issue of finding and paying an artist to do the artwork, and then a letterer to write letters in the speech and thought bubbles. When all of this was done, she discovered that publishers were uninterested in buying it, and so Dr. Leclerq also had to learn about self-publishing. Her friend offered to buy a copy for every prison library in Texas, and then the Texas Board of Criminal Justice had the book banned from prison libraries. "That was the lowest point, for me," says Dr. Leclerq. "Their own authorities had helped me with the book."

The finished product is a graphic novel titled *Prison Grievances*, a handbook for prisoners to navigate the grievance process. The novel follows a no-nonsense pro-bono lawyer named Mr. Dibs—an acronym for "don't be stupid"—as he enters prisons to teach inmates about their rights while incarcerated. It also teaches them how to file grievances, which are complaints against unjust treatment of prisoners by the prison system; and warns against filing excessive or petty grievances. By doing this, it empowers inmates to have their problems properly addressed rather than overlooked due to a litigation error.

By offering this power, the novel has impacted many prisoners who have read and used it. In Dr. Leclerq's office, there are plastic tubs crammed full of mail from inmates, and more mail comes in every day. Some of these people write to express their gratitude, while some write to express confusion as to why their grievance got rejected by the system. Dr. Leclerq replies

to them, explaining what went wrong with their grievance. "Sometimes it's too scattered," says Dr. Leclerq. "And sometimes it's a perfect grievance and they just got screwed."

For the book, Dr. Leclerq has been awarded the 2018 Golden Pen Award, which honors those who make a significant advancement in Legal Writing. She is the first activist to win the award and hopes to represent fellow activists working in her field. Although her career has included many accolades and important publications, this one holds special significance. "We all need to do something about injustice," she says. "This book was my attempt to do something."

Moving forward, Dr. Leclerq has been asked by the Texas Juvenile Justice System to put together a book like *Prison Grievances* for children in the JJS. She's excited that people understand "they need to change their approach to educating people who need it, to find a way to reach them without letting the legalese get in the way of the message." She encourages everyone to use their voices to rectify injustices in the world, through whatever means available, to make a positive impact.

Dr. Terri Leclerq received both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Texas State University and is a founder and active member of the Donor and Alumni Advisory Council for the Department of English at Texas State. The council works to create a bond between the English Department's faculty, students, alumna, and donors. Dr. Leclerq offers insight into the legal community's expectations for the English Department and its students.