

THE CHURCH IN AN AGE OF TURMOIL

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The temptations of frantic anxiety are not unique to modern society. Ever since the cursed assurance of a sweating brow in Genesis 3:19, humans have been creatures of worry. What is historically novel, however, is the way that social media companies have monetized hysteria. Clicks mean money. And few things monopolize social media feeds like large-scale crises.

Even if you have sworn off the addictive algorithms of Silicon Valley, other forces still profit from your disquiet. Cable news channels work hard to keep at least one of your eyes on their relentless reporting of scandal and calamity—that is, with a few commercial breaks along the way.

And if they do pause from the infinite loop of real-time coverage of disaster and social outrage, it is only to harness your apprehensions with raging diatribes that pass themselves off as political and social commentary. The politicians themselves tap the power of this foreboding and build their platforms atop hand-wringing neuroses.

We live amid a cadre of forces that traffic in our angst and anger. Against such a backdrop, our Savior's exhortations about anxiety are quite subversive (Matt. 6:25–34). With a view toward the final crisis that the coming of the kingdom of heaven has unleashed in the world, Jesus tells His disciples this:

“And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.” (24:6–8)

“See that you are not alarmed.” This is a taller order than we might imagine, especially when we consider that in our fallenness we bear an innate aptitude for alarmism. Implementing Jesus' admonition requires self-discipline and self-awareness. Yet peace is among the many things that Christ has left gift-wrapped for His church upon His ascension (John 14:27).

Now, the peace that surpasses all understanding (Phil. 4:7) certainly should not be confused with stiff-lipped stoicism. Lament in the face of tragedy and an earnest interest in civic well-being are both proper fruits of Christian faith. The kingdom of heaven does not call us to the world-flight of monasticism or pietism. But gospel-shaped empathy (Rom. 12:15) and civic virtue (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Tim. 2:1–4; 1 Peter 2:12) are markedly different from the hysteria that comes from an anxious engrossment with the things of this passing age (1 Cor. 7:29–31).

A Spirit-induced sense of composure should be conspicuous among Christians.

What, then, are the prerogatives of the church in times of upheaval and crisis? One, undoubtedly, is the discipline of tranquility of spirit. As the church is a city set on a hill for all to see, a Spirit-induced sense of composure should be conspicuous among Christians. Fearmongering and vitriol will do nothing to set us apart from the world, even if they are induced by our support of otherwise righteous causes.

But the fuel for this peace does not come from our own resources. It comes to us through the preaching of the Word. It is in the nature of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven to produce placidness of soul. Christian calm is downstream from the means of grace. So what is the principal thing that the church

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must do in times of crisis? It must do what it always must do. It must proclaim the gospel and attend to the hearing of the gospel as it is proclaimed.

In the face of a liberalism that tried to retool preaching to be an instrument to solve social crises, J. Gresham Machen gave an exhortation that is just as apt a century later:

Is there no refuge from strife? Is there no place of refreshing where a man can prepare for the battle of life? Is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus' name, to forget for the moment all those things that divide nation from nation and race from race, to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of industrial strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross? If there be such a place, then that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world.

The chief prerogative of the church amid crisis is to preach the gospel, which heralds a peace that transcends and subjugates the fretful concerns of this passing age. That is the vision of Christ Himself. After warning His disciples not to be alarmed in the face of the upheaval of the world, He goes on to identify what it is that drives history to the other side of its turmoil: "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

Jesus does not envision His church's turning the tide of the crisis of this passing age by means of frenzied political and social activism. He envisions its doing so by preaching the gospel. It is the driving force that impels the movement of time to the appointed hour when the whole of creation will finally be set free from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:19–23).

During World War II, the British government developed a slogan to steel its populace amid the crisis of the war. That slogan has lived on in popular culture well beyond the exigencies of the war: "Keep calm and carry on." Christians do well to live by a similar slogan: "Keep calm and preach on."

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