

“Responsibility”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

...If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.

By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.

Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

Romans 12:20-21

Let us pray... O God,

Blessed is your name, for you remember us in the time of our distress.

You search for us in our despair and you call us into life. You never fail us.

Strengthen us to your good purpose. Don't let us let you down. In Jesus' name we pray... Amen

Isn't it ironic that when the news media report some awful event perpetrated by an obscure rebellious group to make a political statement, it is said that they are “claiming responsibility”.

Well, they don't claim any responsibility

when it comes to cleaning up the aftermath of their actions.

Wouldn't it be great if there actually were more responsible human beings standing up to make a difference for the common good?

In recent years, I have wondered about how people are drawn into the worst activities, pledging allegiance to violent organizations, on the assumption of giving one's life to serve a great purpose along with the camaraderie of comrades.

Well I have been in that category, too, considering I am a West Point graduate and will soon be celebrating with classmates for our 40th reunion, and that I served 7 years active duty that took me to East Germany and South Korea.

While stationed as an instructor at the Signal Officers School, at Ft. Gordon in Augusta, GA, I attended Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church. It had a huge, stone cathedral-style sanctuary with probably 300 people in attendance every Sunday.

It was my third time back to Ft Gordon – and that was after a tour in the Republic of Korea at a remote outpost called Camp Colbern.

En route to Korea, I had recommitted my life to Christ and resolved to attend church every Sunday and our remote outpost had its own little one room chapel, halfway up the hill, towards the motorpool.

Maybe 8 people were there in the pews on a Sunday morning – including the chaplain, a young woman playing piano, a mentally challenged woman who put flowers on the altar every week, a few other soldiers, and me.

When I got back stateside, I promised myself to find a big church to sit in a sanctuary and just be surrounded by lots of people!

Willard, p.2

Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta, GA, was such a church, and they had a wonderful senior pastor named Dan McCall and a new assistant pastor, fresh out of seminary who I really admired – especially for doing a dramatic monologue as the Apostle Paul.

By this time I was planning to leave the Army at the end of my 6 year obligation to go from Ft Gordon to Lancaster Theological Seminary in PA.

I loved my time there at Ft Gordon and had many good friends, but I was looking forward to leaving the service to study theology.

Despite the considerable influence of conservative evangelicals on me at the time, I was not convinced that the Bible is the ‘inerrant Word of God’, but...

that it is ‘infallible’ – there is buried treasure there, if you look for it.

A couple at Reid Memorial gave me a copy of the Oxford *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible – a version which I have continued to use to this day.

Excited about ministry and mission, I attended various talks by religious writers associated with conservative Francis Schaeffer, who wrote a book called,

The Christian Manifesto,

Schaeffer had a lot to say about art and faith. and I specifically remember this phrase from his book about how Christians needed to be competitive ‘in the marketplace of ideas.’

US Army Chaplain Buddy Dugan and I worked together on the Officers “Leadership Ethics” class – even producing a VHS cassette as a training video with scenes from various movies.

My interest in storytelling was kindled at this time.

when Chaplain Dugan, gave a class on the subject.

He said that storytelling – as the ‘lore of a community’, serves to remind us of our origins, defines the character of who we are as a group, and provides a guide for moving into the future.

From those foundational experiences,

Biblical storytelling has served as an integral part of my 20 years of ministry for how I share the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ.

It was in one of the Reid Memorial Church’s bulletins

that I found a prayer that really spoke to me about the mission of Christianity.

I have used a version of this, here from time to time as a benediction:

Go forth into the world in peace, be of good courage,

hold fast to that which is good, return to no one evil for evil;

But strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering,

honor all persons, love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

Willard, p.3

It was in a bulletin for us to say together as we closed the service –
and I really liked it.

There was a sense of mission that really appealed to me
as a young military officer – who was leaving the Army to go to seminary.
In fact, I have often told people that the common thread
between my time as a soldier and since then as a pastor, is “service”.

As I said, while I was in the service, conservative Christians were
a strong influence on me for such learned skills as praying aloud
and participating in Bible study – for which I am grateful.

Other Christians who were progressive, likewise challenged me
to see applications of Christianity for social activism.

In case you are wondering where Christian social activism might apply...
just turn on the radio, the TV, read the paper, or go online...

Texas and Louisiana are still feeling the effects of Hurricane Harvey
as people are being rescued by local, state, and FEMA volunteers
as well as the ‘Cajun navy’; crews are still working to restore utilities;
government and insurance reps are assessing the damages;
homeowners return to clean up their properties;
and in the meantime gas prices begin to soar;
preparations are made to provide federal aid –
and so are preparations for funerals to lay their dead to rest.
Houston, in particular, is setting a great example for loving one’s neighbor
as one of the most ethnically diverse cities in America –
especially as their authorities are reassuring undocumented people that
they will not be rounded up by Immigration Customs Enforcement officers.

Meanwhile, monsoon rains and flooding have killed
1,400 people in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh.

Tropical Storm Lydia is active on the west coast of Mexico and
Hurricane Irma is threatening to come our way from the Atlantic.

It is also reported that there are 50 active wild fires
throughout our western states.

At what point does climate change go from being a political issue
to becoming a public policy concern?

When will it go from scientific speculation to the fulfillment of prophecy?

In the midst of these environmental crises –
and the threat of a nuclear holocaust with North Korea,
and the threat of a race war in this country over “Lost Cause” statues,
it was announced that a federal policy excluding transgender people
from the US military is set to be implemented in 6 months.

Willard, p.4

On top of that, a coalition of evangelical leaders signed “The Nashville Statement” which is a repudiation of LGBTQ rights on the basis of Christian morality. Brian McLaren – a progressive evangelical writer, put out a statement himself: in which he *‘passionately disagree[s] with the Nashville Statement’*, saying: *Theologically, it is based on the same regressive way of reading the Bible that was used to justify slavery, anti-Semitism, apartheid, the suppression of women, the rejection of good science, and the slaughter of the native peoples. It’s hard to believe the signors[sic] have still not critically assessed the toxic fruit of centuries of reading the Bible in this discredited way.*

He goes on to say:

Socially, however unintentionally or unconsciously, the statement plays into the same virulent scapegoating that has encouraged the KKK and other white supremacists to take off their sheets. Its timing with Hurricane Harvey was insensitive enough; add to that its synchronicity with the obvious homophobia of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville and the President’s transgender ban.

There’s more, and this letter is posted – along with The Nashville Statement, on the kiosk in the Narthex.

Brian McLaren urges those who are seeking a church family that welcomes all people, to check the list of such churches on “convergence us.org”

There is an affirmation of three agreements that is asked of any churches that seek to be included on this list, and they are:

- 1. equality for all people*
- 2. advocating for the rights of immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ people*
- 3. a commitment to work together in the healing and protecting of our planet.*

<http://convergenceus.org/churches/>

UCC at The Villages is not currently on that list, but I would like our Governing Board to consider it, in view of the fact that we are already declared as an “open & affirming” congregation.

Mission implies a responsibility – but also a choice...

like the opening sequence of that 1960s TV show, “Mission Impossible”. where the tape recorder says,

‘Your mission... should you choose to accept it...’

What does that mean to you, though?

Willard, p.5

I have endeavored to experiment with what 'evangelism' should mean these days – especially, during my sabbatical ventures.

What is the message of the Gospel? What is the Good News these days?

I led a workshop at the Network of Biblical Storytellers Festival Gathering the first week of August and I asked the participants to consider what their persona 'canon' is?

What are the set of stories that are most important to them, that they know and tell?

What are the songs that they know and sing?

These are the building blocks of those faith communities that formed the early Christian church.

When the Roman Empire began its brutal persecutions against Christians around 66 CE, killing the apostles, Peter and Paul, as well as other eye witnesses and storytellers, the early Christians they needed to write down the stories of Jesus – the 'good news' of Christ for future generations to share.

We have an obligation – a responsibility, to tell the story of Christ, which is the Gospel according to you, in your words and your witness.

Here is part of what I see as an important witness to make

that I have been learning through my ministry here with you:

To be 'born again' means to give up what is false and hurtful in order to be who you are, and that God holds us responsible to help others to be who they are.

LGBTQ people are heroic examples of this, risking everything to be who they are.

Jesus as one who came from God – the Son of God, courageously confronted the powers of this world nonviolently, endured their malice, and gave love & forgiveness in return.

In so doing, Christ exposed the vicious cycle of blame & retribution – a cycle to be broken by us as we follow his example.

We are to help others meet God as nonviolent, through the stories of Christ and for others to meet Christ as "friend" through us.

We as a church must work to become that Beloved Community that is possible, 'on Earth as it is in Heaven'.

The witness of women in our time is that their issues are human issues, and that this is the bottom line for what is most important to God – that we love one another;

We need to hear the Gospel according to Women.

This is what I am learning through my ministry with you. So, what is your Gospel?

What is the Good News according to you? It is your responsibility to find that out and share...

Amen

*Our lesson from Romans 12:9-21 describes the law of love,
the practice of hospitality, and non-violent direct action,
as a Christian's duty...*

- ⁹ Love should be shown without pretending.
Hate evil, and hold on to what is good.
- ¹⁰ Love each other like the members of your family.
Be the best at showing honor to each other.
- ¹¹ Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—
be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord!
- ¹² Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble,
and devote yourselves to prayer.
- ¹³ Contribute to the needs of God's people,
and welcome strangers into your home.
- ¹⁴ Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them.
¹⁵ Be happy with those who are happy,
and cry with those who are crying.
- ¹⁶ Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else.
Instead, associate with people who have no status.
Don't think that you're so smart.
- ¹⁷ Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions,
but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.
- ¹⁸ If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.
¹⁹ Don't try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends,
but leave room for God's wrath. It is written,
Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.
- ²⁰ Instead, *If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.
By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.*
²¹ Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 16:21-28

- ²¹ From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.
- ²² And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”
- ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”
- ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any [one] would come after me, let [them] deny [themselves] and take up [their] cross and follow me.
- ²⁵ For whoever would save [their] life will lose it, and whoever loses [their] life for my sake will find it.
- ²⁶ For what will it profit [someone], if [they gain] the whole world and [forfeit their] life?
Or what shall [someone] give in return for [their] life?
- ²⁷ For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay [everyone] for what [they have] done.
- ²⁸ Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.”

WHY I APPLAUD (AND FERVENTLY DENY) THE NASHVILLE STATEMENT

By Brian McLaren

I passionately disagree with the Nashville Statement.

Theologically, it is based on the same regressive way of reading the Bible that was used to justify slavery, anti-Semitism, apartheid, the suppression of women, the rejection of good science, and the slaughter of the native peoples. It's hard to believe the signors have still not critically assessed the toxic fruit of centuries of reading the Bible in this discredited way.

Socially, however unintentionally or unconsciously, the statement plays into the same virulent scapegoating that has encouraged the KKK and other white supremacists to take off their sheets. Its timing with Hurricane Harvey was insensitive enough; add to that its synchronicity with the obvious homophobia of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville and the President's transgender ban.

Politically, the Nashville Statement perfectly serves the purposes of Trumpism by creating a pristine and pure "us" who need to push the dirty "other" to the margins.

Spiritually, it expresses exactly the kind of Christianity that I have been urging people to migrate beyond.

But I applaud the statement for three reasons.

First, it makes explicit what has been hidden. People will now know more clearly which churches are safe and accepting for themselves, their friends, and their relatives, and which are spiritually hostile and psychologically dangerous.

Second, the statement puts pressure on the large number of LGBTQ-sympathetic Evangelicals who are trying to remain anonymous (you know who you are). These folks have been hoping they could fly under the doctrinal radar or play the middle, not "coming out" as LGBTQ affirming on the one hand, and not being openly hostile on the other. The Statement will push many of them to position themselves either inside or outside its parameters. I occupied this ambiguous middle zone for too many years, so I know about it, and I am glad that this lukewarm space will be harder to occupy going forward.

Third, the statement challenges LGBTQ-equal churches to open their doors and welcome Evangelical refugees in. This will be good for both parties involved. (For people seeking a new church, or for churches seeking to declare themselves so they can be found by seekers, check out this website: <http://convergenceus.org/churches/>)

One of the blessings of my fundamentalist/Evangelical upbringing was that I memorized a lot of Bible verses, one of which went like this: "Don't allow yourself to be overpowered with evil. Take the offensive—overpower evil by good!" For those of us who see the marginalization and stigmatization of LGBTQ persons as evil, I trust the Nashville Statement will strengthen our resolve and energize our creative, constructive, and good response.

Brian McLaren is an author, speaker, activist and Auburn Senior Fellow whose latest book is *The Great Spiritual Migration*.

For those ready to differentiate themselves, the Nashville Statement has already evoked responses such as *The Denver Statement*, *The Christians United Statement* and *The Liturgists Statement* which people can sign or otherwise affirm as an alternative. Please also read the response from Rev. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush at Auburn Seminary.

<http://auburnseminary.org/applaud-fervently-deny-nashville-statement/>

The Nashville Statement

A Coalition for Biblical Sexuality

“Know that the LORD Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves...”
-Psalm 100:3

Preamble

Evangelical Christians at the dawn of the twenty-first century find themselves living in a period of historic transition. As Western culture has become increasingly post-Christian, it has embarked upon a massive revision of what it means to be a human being. By and large the spirit of our age no longer discerns or delights in the beauty of God’s design for human life. Many deny that God created human beings for his glory, and that his good purposes for us include our personal and physical design as male and female. It is common to think that human identity as male and female is not part of God’s beautiful plan, but is, rather, an expression of an individual’s autonomous preferences. The pathway to full and lasting joy through God’s good design for his creatures is thus replaced by the path of shortsighted alternatives that, sooner or later, ruin human life and dishonor God.

This secular spirit of our age presents a great challenge to the Christian church. Will the church of the Lord Jesus Christ lose her biblical conviction, clarity, and courage, and blend into the spirit of the age? Or will she hold fast to the word of life, draw courage from Jesus, and unashamedly proclaim his way as the way of life? Will she maintain her clear, counter-cultural witness to a world that seems bent on ruin?

We are persuaded that faithfulness in our generation means declaring once again the true story of the world and of our place in it—particularly as male and female. Christian Scripture teaches that there is but one God who alone is Creator and Lord of all. To him alone, every person owes gladhearted thanksgiving, heart-felt praise, and total allegiance. This is the path not only of glorifying God, but of knowing ourselves. To forget our Creator is to forget who we are, for he made us for himself. And we cannot know ourselves truly without truly knowing him who made us. We did not make ourselves. We are not our own. Our true identity, as male and female persons, is given by God. It is not only foolish, but hopeless, to try to make ourselves what God did not create us to be.

We believe that God’s design for his creation and his way of salvation serve to bring him the greatest glory and bring us the greatest good. God’s good plan provides us with the greatest freedom. Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it in overflowing measure. He is for us and not against us. Therefore, in the hope of serving Christ’s church and witnessing publicly to the good purposes of God for human sexuality revealed in Christian Scripture, we offer the following affirmations and denials.

Article 1

WE AFFIRM that God has designed marriage to be a covenantal, sexual, procreative, lifelong union of one man and one woman, as husband and wife, and is meant to signify the covenant love between Christ and his bride the church. WE DENY that God has designed marriage to be a homosexual, polygamous, or polyamorous relationship. We also deny that marriage is a mere human contract rather than a covenant made before God.

Article 2

WE AFFIRM that God’s revealed will for all people is chastity outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage. WE DENY that any affections, desires, or commitments ever justify sexual intercourse before or outside marriage; nor do they justify any form of sexual immorality.

Article 3

WE AFFIRM that God created Adam and Eve, the first human beings, in his own image, equal before God as persons, and distinct as male and female. WE DENY that the divinely ordained differences between male and female render them unequal in dignity or worth.

Article 4

WE AFFIRM that divinely ordained differences between male and female reflect God's original creation design and are meant for human good and human flourishing. WE DENY that such differences are a result of the Fall or are a tragedy to be overcome.

Article 5

WE AFFIRM that the differences between male and female reproductive structures are integral to God's design for self-conception as male or female. WE DENY that physical anomalies or psychological conditions nullify the God-appointed link between biological sex and self-conception as male or female.

Article 6

WE AFFIRM that those born with a physical disorder of sex development are created in the image of God and have dignity and worth equal to all other image-bearers. They are acknowledged by our Lord Jesus in his words about "eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb." With all others they are welcome as faithful followers of Jesus Christ and should embrace their biological sex insofar as it may be known. WE DENY that ambiguities related to a person's biological sex render one incapable of living a fruitful life in joyful obedience to Christ.

Article 7

WE AFFIRM that self-conception as male or female should be defined by God's holy purposes in creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture. WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption.

Article 8

WE AFFIRM that people who experience sexual attraction for the same sex may live a rich and fruitful life pleasing to God through faith in Jesus Christ, as they, like all Christians, walk in purity of life. WE DENY that sexual attraction for the same sex is part of the natural goodness of God's original creation, or that it puts a person outside the hope of the gospel.

Article 9

WE AFFIRM that sin distorts sexual desires by directing them away from the marriage covenant and toward sexual immorality— a distortion that includes both heterosexual and homosexual immorality. WE DENY that an enduring pattern of desire for sexual immorality justifies sexually immoral behavior.

Article 10

WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness. WE DENY that the approval of homosexual immorality or transgenderism is a matter of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.

Article 11

WE AFFIRM our duty to speak the truth in love at all times, including when we speak to or about one another as male or female. WE DENY any obligation to speak in such ways that dishonor God's design of his imagebearers as male and female.

Article 12

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ gives both merciful pardon and transforming power, and that this pardon and power enable a follower of Jesus to put to death sinful desires and to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ is insufficient to forgive all sexual sins and to give power for holiness to every believer who feels drawn into sexual sin.

Article 13

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ enables sinners to forsake transgender selfconceptions and by divine forbearance to accept the God-ordained link between one's biological sex and one's self-conception as male or female. WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ sanctions self-conceptions that are at odds with God's revealed will.

Article 14

WE AFFIRM that Christ Jesus has come into the world to save sinners and that through Christ's death and resurrection forgiveness of sins and eternal life are available to every person who repents of sin and trusts in Christ alone as Savior, Lord, and supreme treasure. WE DENY that the Lord's arm is too short to save or that any sinner is beyond his reach.