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How Christians Can Bear Gospel Witness in an Anxious Age, by Tim Keller and John Inazu

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Our confidence in the gospel spurs us to serve our communities, not to shrink back when they decide they no longer need us.

As the Catholic writer Joseph Bottum has observed, we live in an anxious age.

In an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing culture, some people are anxious about shifting cultural norms, civil rights, and religious liberty. The past decade has seen a rapid transformation in public opinion and legal norms around sexuality, same-sex marriage, transgender rights, and religion in the public square—changes that have caused anxiety for a great number of traditional religious believers, including Christians, Muslims, and Orthodox Jews.

Socioeconomic disparities create other anxieties. Some people have been left jobless or underemployed by the global economy. Others confront inadequacies in housing, education, and health care in impoverished and often segregated neighborhoods and communities. And people wonder why those with greater means are indifferent to the financial burdens of the lower and middle classes.

There is, of course, an even more dire anxiety that emerges when some people prove incapable of living with our differences. In the past few years, violent men have taken innocent lives in places including a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, the apartment of a Muslim family in North Carolina, a black church in Charleston, and just last week, a gay nightclub in Florida. In each of these instances, vulnerable communities became the intentional targets of mass violence, leaving others in those communities wondering about their own safety and sense of belonging in this country.

How should Christians in the United States bear witness in an anxious age? We start by understanding the context in which we live. That begins by

understanding the context from which we have come and the ways in which that context has contributed to some of our current anxieties.

The Protestant Culture of the Past

“Christianity as a social phenomenon,” wrote theologian Lesslie Newbigin, “has always and necessarily been conditioned as to its outward form by other social facts.” When Newbigin wrote this in 1941, one of the main “social facts” in the United States was that public norms were dictated by a distinctly American Protestant culture in the white middle class. As such, Protestant churches provided many Americans with a great part of their social identity. The majority of Americans, whether or not they were devout, identified with some church and its basic teachings. These teachings—for better, and sometimes for worse—contributed to a largely monolithic way of thinking about religion and morality. By the middle of the 20th century, that way of thinking had made room for some Catholic and Jewish influences, but little else.

The Protestant culture contributed to many traditional norms, including the two-parent family, the value of work and frugality, the priority of the local community, and the importance of personal virtue. Its moral cohesion built and sustained major institutions that to this day provide billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of volunteers for charitable work.

On the other hand, the Protestant culture also failed to recognize, and sometimes enabled, significant injustices. Protestants were indifferent and sometimes hostile toward the civil liberties challenges that religious minorities confronted. Most white Protestants’ absence from the civil rights movement perpetuated personal and structural racism that exists to this day. And the cultural and legal power of the Protestant culture often stifled differing views about religion, gender, and sexuality.

The Social Facts Have Changed

The past decade has seen tremendous shifts in immigration, globalization, and technological specialization that have contributed to what some have called the Age of Fracture. But as Joseph Bottum has suggested, “the single most significant fact over the past few decades in America—the great explanatory event from which follows nearly everything in our social and political history—is the crumbling of the Mainline [Protestant] churches as central institutions in our national experience.” Whatever one thinks of

mainline Protestantism today, Bottum is right that it once provided the sociological and institutional framework that sustained the Protestant culture. That framework no longer exists. In its absence, the deep and accelerating cultural trends toward individualism and autonomy have continued to erode trust in social institutions—business, government, church, and even the family. And neither evangelicalism nor Roman Catholicism nor secularism has been able to fill the vacuum left by the shrinking of the Protestant mainline.

This new cultural reality raises some anxieties, but it also presents many of us with an opportunity to rediscover Christian witness in a world that we do not control. The dominant Protestant culture enabled some Christians in this country to forget, as the book of Hebrews proclaims, that here we have no abiding city. While we are called to love our neighbors and to maintain what James Davison Hunter has called “faithful presence,” no human society can be identified with the kingdom of God. Christians profess that our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), which means that we are never quite at home.

We can also learn from the biblical witness how to engage in the world around us. The book of Jeremiah tells the story of God using the prophet to instruct the Jews in Babylon not to hate or ignore the pagan city, but to become long-term residents, to exercise good will toward it through prayer, and to seek its peace and prosperity. They were to build up the social fabric for their *common* well-being (“if [Babylon] prospers, you too will prosper” [Jer. 29:7]). They were to be known as a people who served their neighbors and their city. At the same time, God’s people were not to place their future hopes in social and economic improvement. They were to love and serve their earthly city, but they were not to forget that God would some day judge that city for its evil and injustice. It was only in God that believers could be sure of a “hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11). In this hope, instead of merely co-existing with the Babylonians, gnawed by memories of former cultural acceptance, the Jews in Babylon were to strive for the good of their city, the growth of the people of God, and their resulting testimony to the glory of God. Like the Jews in Babylon living in a foreign land, Christians are—and always have been—“resident aliens” called to love our neighbors with deeds of service so that those around us will “see [our] good deeds and glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12 NIV).

To live as resident aliens entails a certain vulnerability, but it does not always mean persecution. Claims that American Christians today are facing persecution sound tone-deaf not only to secular progressives but also to many non-white religious believers who have long been actual minorities. That isn't to say that demographics aren't changing, or that Christians in the United States don't face legal abuses and miscarriages of justice. But it is a caution about the use of language and a posture of the heart.

Whatever our circumstances, Christians are called to pray for rulers and nations. We know the love and grace of Jesus, who gave himself for us while we were yet enemies, and who calls us to serve our neighbors sacrificially whether they believe as we do or not.

Three Examples of Engagement: Politics, Race, and Religious Liberty

One way that we can engage with the world around us is by attending to the practical needs of our neighbors. When tragedy strikes any community, Christians ought to be among the first to give time, money, and other resources to help those who have been harmed and to mend the social fabric. We can respond with compassion and love for the sake of our neighbors, with actions as well as with words. We can do so in response to tragedies that unfold in seconds, and to those that take shape over the course of decades.

Sometimes, loving our neighbors means engaging in politics. *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson recently observed that the maxim “politics always follows culture” is most often espoused by those who have the luxury of reflecting on culture. For many people, however, politics is not an afterthought but an urgent need. That is particularly true in areas where the social fabric is torn. In these settings, politics—and law, government, and public institutions—can often be a matter of life and death. Christians have a role to play in these settings, not as self-interested rulers but as active participants seeking the good of our neighbors. Of course, politics is messy, and Christians who engage in it will quickly find themselves working with people and institutions whose purposes are not gospel-oriented. But practical partnership does not require endorsing all of the goals or values of those with whom we partner.

Another area where Christians can bear witness in an anxious age is by committing to the work of racial justice. Despite the many failures of

white-majority churches to take action in this area, the gospel has tremendous resources for seeking justice and peace across racial divisions. The death and resurrection of Jesus has broken down cultural barriers throughout history—no other major religion has spread as far and across as many cultures as Christianity.

For many people of color, frustration has outpaced hope. Yet Christians, as Thabiti Anyabwile notes, can resist “the temptation to hopelessness,” even in the “thick fog of despair that settles on entire blocks of families mangled and maligned by mass incarceration.” The consequences of mass incarceration are enormous, as are the ongoing realities of neighborhood and school segregation, education inequity, and employment and health care disparities. Christian hope is not blind optimism. But neither is it utter despair.

Christians of all races can learn how longstanding policies and practices around housing, education, and criminal justice disproportionately harm some of their neighbors. We can take the time to listen to the pain of our neighbors without presuming either easy solutions or insurmountable challenges (and sometimes we will need first to learn how to listen). Instead of walking away from challenges that seem “too big,” Christians who confront the barriers of race and class disparities can draw near to their affected neighbors through the power of the gospel. Suburban churches can engage in the hard work of understanding the personal and structural consequences of generational injustice. Through a posture of reconciliation and humility (not merely a vision of “community service”), they can engage urban communities through volunteering with early-stage literacy programs, partnering with ministries in underserved neighborhoods, and investing financial and human capital in local urban businesses.

Finally, Christians might engage in the cause of religious liberty with more hope and less anxiety. Many Christians today feel increasing legal pressures on their institutions and the ways of life they are accustomed to. Some of these challenges are significant: campus ministries experience hurdles to campus access, Christian adoption and social service agencies confront regulations in tension with their missional convictions, and Christian educational institutions face threats to their accreditation and tax-exempt status. We should not be naïve to these challenges, and we should work diligently to find appropriate legal and policy responses. But we must make

our case in publicly accessible terms that appeal to people of good will from a variety of religious traditions and those of no religious tradition. In doing so, we cannot ignore the importance of religious liberty for all. There is no principled legal or theological argument that looks only to the good of Christians over the interests of others.

Focusing on others means attending to the challenges and limits that *they* confront in the practice of their faith. Today's cultural climate makes it especially essential for Christians to defend the religious liberty of American Muslims. Whatever challenges Christians may feel to their practices pale in comparison to the cultural and often legal challenges that confront American Muslims. As one Muslim leader shared, "Muslims today are afraid to *think* in this country." These challenges are exacerbated when some Muslims engage in acts of terror in this country. Even though Christians and atheists also perpetrate acts of terror and violence (in places like movie theaters, elementary schools, and shopping malls), many of our neighbors react with particular fear and judgment when the perpetrator is identified with Islam.

We can be encouraged by the work of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which spends time and money defending people of all faiths, including Muslims. Other prominent Christian leaders, like Russell Moore, have rightly challenged the anti-Muslim rhetoric that has emerged from some segments of religious and political discourse. We can do this on the local level, too. Christians can engage with our Muslim neighbors through acts of friendship, sharing meals, and opening our homes and churches to refugees. And we can resist careless rhetoric that imputes the actions of some onto the beliefs of all. Just as we rightly resist charges that all Christians are bigots or that Christian teachings are responsible for violence against abortion clinics, we should be quick to do the same when the perpetrators of violence are tied to other faiths or identity groups.

Confidence in the Gospel

Our engagement in the world in an anxious age is made possible by our confidence in the gospel in a pluralistic society where people have profoundly different beliefs. We won't always be able to persuade those around us that our beliefs are right and theirs are wrong. Indeed, some of our most important beliefs stem from contested premises that others do not share. But recognizing the existence of these disagreements should not prevent us from holding to what is ultimately true. Our beliefs can be true,

and we can hold these warranted beliefs confidently even though others reject them. For this reason, recognizing the social fact of difference should not be mistaken as relativism. To the contrary, a greater awareness of our distinctiveness that comes from confidence in the gospel can encourage us to work to strengthen the social fabric for the good of others.

This kind of posture is what one of us has called “confident pluralism.” As Christians, we can engage with the pluralism around us because our confidence lies elsewhere. We can acknowledge genuine differences in society without suppressing or minimizing our firmly held convictions. We can seek common ground even with those who may not share our view of the common good.

Engaging across differences is not without risk. Duke professor Luke Bretherton warns against several dangers that such engagement may bring. There is “co-option,” in which the church ends up becoming a mere instrument for political or social cohesion, “competition,” in which the church becomes just another affinity group demanding its rights, and “commodification,” in which the church becomes another form of therapy, private fulfillment, or lifestyle choice. The allure of acceptance and accommodation increases the need for the practices of discipleship, formation, and worship that remind us why the church is not a political party, an identity group, or a social club.

In the other direction, we risk rejection and misunderstanding. There will be those who dismiss practices like prayer, forgiveness, and proclamation as naïve and impractical. These reactions should not surprise us. Confidence in the gospel is and has always been a radical idea for this world. The gospel is the otherworldly hope that sustains us. It is the hope that encourages Christians to enter into broken and wounded places, with acts of friendship and love. It is the hope of black Christians who choose to believe and forgive in the face of racial injustice, and of Christians of all races who join in the difficult work of restoration and reconciliation. It is the hope of Christians who stand with Muslims in the common cause of religious liberty.

The audacity of Christian hope is that Jesus Christ came into the world, and is reconciling all things to himself. He is both the subject and object of our confidence, and as generations of saints who have come before us have testified in word and in deed, he is sufficient. It is with that hope and that

confidence that we engage in the world in an anxious age.