

DECLARING WHERE WE STAND OVERTURE

Hudson River Presbytery overtures the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to affirm the following declaration:

*As confessing Christians,
we trust God, whom we know through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray as others
pray in other names.*

*We are obligated to declare our concerns about the direction towards autocracy that
our country is taking.*

*We say Yes to God's power of love and justice for the neighbor as well as the self; and
we say No to demonic power that urges hate of the other, scatters blame, and
creates civic discord.*

*We say Yes to our imperfect democracy with one person, one vote and No to any
corruption of our elections.*

We say Yes to universal health care and No to care based on the ability to pay.

*We say Yes to safe schools, houses of worship, and public gathering places; and No to
civilian access to assault weapons.*

*We say Yes to core human values and No to dividing our humanity by ideology and
partisanship.*

We say Yes to bridges and No to walls.

We say: "In life, and in death we belong to God."

Rationale:

Our Reformed tradition has, from its inception, claimed a vigorous role for the church in public life. Our tradition affirms that government is a good, created by God for the right ordering of the earthly realm. We also acknowledge that government, as it exists on earth, is a human institution, and thus subject to the debilitating effects of human sinfulness. At those times when our government acts to violate norms central to what we believe, we claim the right to raise our voices prophetically against those policies that do so.

John Calvin, in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, speaks with clarity about the authority of the state, but also of its limits. He writes:

But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him [sic] to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow.¹

Cont.

If Calvin's language is difficult for 21st century Christians to parse, existing as it does in a vocabulary of absolute monarchy, Karl Barth extends Calvin's claim to a 20th century context, and places on the church an obligation. Barth writes:

If the State has perverted its God-given authority, it cannot be honoured better than by this criticism which is due to it in all circumstances. For this power that

has been perverted, what greater service can we render than that of intercession?ⁱⁱ

The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.) contains two documents from the church's history in the 20th century that took the prophetic role of the church seriously and dared to speak truth to power. The Barmen Declaration, written in response to the dehumanizing policies of the National Socialist Party in Germany, and the Belhar Confession, written to stand against the apartheid policies of the government of the Union of South Africa, are both vibrant and living witnesses to the power of our theological tradition and the weight of the responsibilities we claim as Christians living in the body politic.

Drawing specifically from the work of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.) and its predecessor bodies, these words from the Confession of 1967 resonate particularly:

The members of the church are emissaries of peace and seek the good of man [sic] in cooperation with powers and authorities in politics, culture, and economics. But they have to fight against pretensions and when these same powers endanger human welfare. Their strength is in their confidence that God's purpose rather than man's [sic] schemes will finally prevail.ⁱⁱⁱ

We also claim our prophetic vocation as the people of God in these words from the Brief Statement of Faith:

In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.^{iv}

Our theology calls us, as Presbyterians, to be active participants in the political life of the world and to speak when fundamental tenets of our faith are being violated. At such a time as this, the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John guide us:

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:10-12)

ⁱ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995) Book IV, Chapter XX, 675.

ⁱⁱ Karl Barth, *Community, Church and State: Three Essays* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968) 139.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Confession of 1967 in *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2014) 290-91.

^{iv} A Brief Statement of Faith in *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2014) 304