

HERE WE STAND: Part 1 Non-Negotiables for the Christian Life

“The world changes, and all that once was strong now proves unsure. How shall any tower withstand such numbers and such reckless hate?”

King Théoden, *The Two Towers*, by J.R.R. Tolkien

There’s a poignant scene in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The forces of Sauron have trapped the armies of King Théoden in the fortress of Helms Deep. There is no escape. Waves of orcs assault the walls. A discouraged King Théoden says to Aragorn, “The world changes, and all that once was strong now proves unsure. How shall any tower withstand such numbers and such reckless hate?”

America, along with much of the world, has in less than a year been thrust into a storm of social, cultural, ethical, and political upheaval. The ‘Wuhan virus’ turned everyday existence upside-down, and the combination of fear and economic ruin created a void. Encouraged by the media and politicians, groups bent on destroying democracy and liberty rushed to fill that void. Today our civilization is under attack. One indicator of the change we have experienced is that last year, one or two athletes knelt in protest during the playing of the national anthem; now, one or two athletes stand. Black Lives Matter, a Marxist, atheist, anti-family, anarchist organization that has burned Bibles and called for the end of the nuclear family is celebrated as a moral voice around the world. It’s no longer a secret: The world as we know it, and the freedoms we have long taken for granted, are under attack. The future hangs in the balance.

But having said this, let me sharpen our focus: Ever since the pilgrims came to America – not to establish slavery, as

the apocryphal *1619 Project* asserts, but to enjoy religious liberty, the so-called ‘American experiment’ has had a clear spiritual underpinning. The Declaration of Independence reflects this with these immortal words:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In 1798 John Adams wrote: *Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.* French historian Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1800s to study our society and culture, cataloguing his findings in his epic *Democracy in America*. In that two-volume study, he noted the inseparable connection between our liberty and our faith:

I stop the first American I meet ... and I ask him if he believes religion to be useful to the stability of laws and to the good order of society; without hesitation he answers that a civilized society, but above all a free society, cannot subsist without religion. ... Even those least versed in the science of government know that much. ... (religion) should be considered the first of [America’s] political institutions. (Harvey Mansfield, "Tocqueville on Religion and Liberty." *American Political Thought*, Spring: 2016.)

Recently, Harvard Business School professor Clay Christensen recounted a conversation he had:

“Some time ago I had a conversation with a Marxist economist from China. He was coming to the end of a Fulbright Fellowship here in Boston, and I asked him if he had learned anything that was surprising or unexpected. And without any hesitation he said “Yeah: I had no idea how critical religion is to the functioning of democracy. The reason why democracy works,” he said, “is not because the government was designed to oversee what everybody does, but rather democracy works because most people, most of the time, voluntarily choose to obey the law. And in your past, most Americans attended a church or a synagogue every week, and they were taught there by people who they respected.” My friend went on to say that Americans followed these rules because they had come to believe that they weren’t just accountable to society, they were accountable to God. My Chinese friend heightened a vague but nagging concern I’ve harbored inside that as religion loses its influence over the lives of Americans, what will happen to our democracy? Where are the institutions that are going to teach the next generation of Americans that they too need to voluntarily choose obey the laws? Because if you take away religion, you can’t hire enough police.

(<https://www.youtube.com/embed/YjntXYDPw44>.)

Martin Luther King Jr. once 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.” In other words, if we as Christians do not proclaim God’s truth – *not ‘my truth’ or ‘your truth,’ but capital-T Truth, God’s truth*, society will progressively devolve into lawlessness and anarchy.

During these last three months I have had a front-row seat from which to observe the unraveling of society, and to reflect on the role of the church. Many Christians in America have become comfortable, a sort of spiritual ‘entitlement generation’ seeking an exhilarating experience of self-fulfilling worship, accompanied by an interesting sermon with a dash of conviction. Somewhere along the way we lost contact with timeless truths that undergird our faith. Too many Christians – *not unbelievers in society, but Christians in churches*, cannot today articulate what gives Christianity its distinctiveness. We have hitched our faith to Bible stories that to many sound like mythical legends, but forgotten the truths based in those Bible stories – and the convictions that gave men and women spiritual strength to stand for God and change their worlds.

This month we are going to identify and engrave in ‘spiritual granite’ truths that distinguish Christianity from the world, that keep us from drifting along with ‘progressive’ cultural currents that only lead to misery and death. *We are the conscience of our nation; we proclaim a message of truth, redemption, and hope.* Why aren’t we doing this, and how can we recover our rightful role once again?

First of all, I want to emphasize that our biggest problem is not attacks from the world, but from those within the church. I’m referring pastors, theologians, seminary professors, and Christian leaders. As we will see this morning and in coming weeks, we have been lulled into complacency: We thought that fundamental truths of God, the Bible, sin, salvation, heaven and hell would always survive. We were wrong.

In many churches today, Christian leaders who should have proclaimed these truths ignore or deny them, and lead God's people astray. This has happened before: In OT Israel, false prophets and priests led Israel into idol worship. In the NT, false teachers infiltrated local churches, denying the gospel. Jesus called them 'wolves in sheep's clothing' (Mt. 7.15; cf. Acts 20.29). The history of the Church contains heroes and heretics, leaders who perverted the truth, and others who led Christians back to it.

Now it is our turn. It's time for us to say, "Here we stand!", to reassert our Christian foundations, and recover the power and saving message we have for the world. That is what we will do this month.

We begin this morning where any discussion of absolute truth begins for the Christian, and that is with the Bible – God's written revelation to man, and our final authority.

Our Final Authority: THE BIBLE IS GOD'S WORD

"For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Jesus, Matthew 5.18)

...for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1.21)

The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever. (Isaiah 40.8)

In one of the most riveting moments in human history, the Apostle John records a behind-the-scenes encounter between Pilate and Jesus, just hours before Pilate turned Jesus over to be crucified. Pilate asks, "You are a king?" Jesus replies, "You say correctly that I am a king...and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate replies with a question that echoes down to today: "What is truth?" (Jn. 18.37-38)

We are experiencing today a vacuum of truth. People don't know what to believe any more. Walter Cronkite, a news anchorman through the 60s and 70s, was called 'the most trusted man in America.' He ended his newscast with the words, "And that's the way it is..." Newscasts today have degenerated into biased *ad hominem* attacks. The title 'fake news' fits. Only 40% of Americans trust the news today.

Truth is being replaced with political correctness. Things we took for granted are turned upside-down. Violent rioting is peaceful, anarchy is good, police cause crime. Marriage and morality are repressive, racist, misogynistic, homophobic, or transphobic. We should've seen this coming. A generation ago the Supreme Court decreed that unborn humans are not human, then they ruled that marriage is no longer between a man and a woman. Common sense started to unravel. Those who say there are only two genders are now accused of hate speech. People like Germaine Greer, Martina Navratilova, and J.K. Rowling are attacked for saying a transgender 'woman' – a man who identifies as a woman – is not really a woman. We're living in an Orwellian *1984* world, and our society is embracing what we know is untrue.

A few weeks ago someone posted this meme, to poke fun at people denying obvious truths. In response, people began posting “2 + 2 = 5.” One wrote: “Saying the only solution is 4 is repressive.”



Another: “The idea of 2 + 2 equaling 4 is cultural and because of western imperialism/colonization, we think of it as the only way of knowing.” Teaching

American history is now under attack. An Illinois state representative wants to abolish the teaching of U.S. history because it ‘drives white privilege and racism.’

This *is* our world. But listen: The way to confront a vacuum of truth is by proclaiming *absolute truth*. Adrift in a sea of meaninglessness without any absolute truth, we affirm that *the Bible is God’s revelation to man, and is absolute truth*.

The first declaration in our church Statement of Faith is this:

We believe that the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, without error in the original writings, and they are the divine and final authority for the Christian in faith and practice.

Why do we start here? Because without a written revelation from God, there is no source of absolute truth. We live in a world that is flooded with more information than ever before, yet truth is hard to find. Facebook and Twitter and Snopes all have their ‘truth-checkers,’ but what they call “true” or “false” depends on what they *want* us to believe.

In philosophy this is called relativism – the idea that there really isn’t any *absolute* truth, there’s just what you or I *think* is true. But no matter how we try to avoid it, we cannot escape from Pilate’s question: What is truth? We see this everywhere in the world: Step off the edge of a building, and it doesn’t matter whether or not you believe in the law of gravity; you will fall. SpaceX may not like having to deal with the difficulties of space travel, but the vacuum of space forces them to. When you buy groceries, you can’t pay what you want; you pay the listed price. If you step on the scales and your weight isn’t what you want, you can adjust the scales, but that doesn’t change the *truth* of what you weigh. We know all this, but we pretend there is no absolute truth in life. None of this has taken the Creator by surprise.

The existence of the Bible is God’s answer to this mass of confusion. God revealed Himself and His truth in written form. Composed by some 40 authors over 2000 years on three continents, it speaks with unity and clarity on subjects from creation to Christ, heaven and hell, marriage and sex, business and finances, morality and ethics. The fundamental questions of life – origin (*Where did I come from?*), meaning (*Why am I here?*), morality (*What is expected of me?*), and destiny (*Where am I going?*) – are answered by the Bible in a way that reveals meaning and purpose in life.

It’s therefore no surprise that Satan attacks the Bible any way he can. One way he does this is by preventing people from being able to get a Bible. In Islamic and communist countries, owning a Bible can get you imprisoned or killed. When these people receive Bibles, they weep tears of joy. They meet in secret for Bible study, and soak in God’s truth.

Another way Satan attacks the Bible is by undermining its authority. In the second half of the 20th century, seminary professors and Christian authors began saying the Bible was filled with errors. The story of creation and Noah's flood is called myth. The account of Jesus' life was made up by His followers. It comes as a surprise to many Christians to hear that most Bible college and seminary professors no longer believe the Bible is God's Word. A well-known evangelical pastor recently said the Old Testament is not as authoritative or reliable as the New Testament. This teaching undermines the authority of the Bible.

But Satan's most effective attack on the Bible is in keeping Christians from reading it. He gets us to ignore the Bible. Most Christians in America own at least one Bible; you can Google it or get a Bible app on your phone. But few of us regularly read the Bible. We're busy or distracted. We aren't aware that in the crush of life, we don't have time for God.

In these unprecedented times, when the world around us is in turmoil, we need God's Word in our lives more than ever. It gives us spiritual wisdom and strength that the world is in need of. We need to commit to reading the Bible regularly. Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood up to Nazi evil in the dark days of Hitler's Germany. How did he do it? He wrote this:

If it is I who determine where God is to be found, then I shall always find a God who corresponds to me in some way, who is obliging, who is connected with my own nature. But if God determines where he is to be found, then it will be in a place which is not at all congenial to me... And I would like to tell you now quite personally: since I have learnt to read the Bible in this way – and this has not been for so very long

– it becomes every day more wonderful to me. I read it in the morning and the evening, often during the day as well, and every day I consider a text which I have chosen for the whole week, and try to sink deeply into it, so as really to hear what it is saying. I know that without this I could not live properly any longer. (Eric Metaxas, Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy, 136-37)

Brothers and sisters, here we stand – on the foundation of the Bible. I love how Scripture illustrates what God's Word is for us:

Your words were found and I ate them, And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts. (Jer. 15.16)

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Your servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward. (Ps. 19.7-11)

These texts characterize Scripture as food – something you take in at regular intervals and without which you would die. The parallel is exact: For us to exhibit a compelling option to a world adrift on a sea of sin and despair, we must be spiritually strong, and this comes by taking in God's Word.

I'm going to conclude this morning with a challenge for us to make a difference in others' lives by choosing a new course in our own.

First, *set aside time each day to read your Bible*. You choose the time, the place, and what you will read. You can start with Genesis and go straight through. You may want to read one OT book, then one from the NT. But starting today, make time to read your Bible.

Second, *find a small group (or start one) that spends time talking about the Bible*. Proverbs 27.17 says, *Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another*. We're stronger together. If you want help in finding a group, call the church office. Meet with others.

The Bible is God's Word. Let God's Word be a lamp to your feet, and a light to your path!