

Building our houses on sand

Exegetical implications of the Sermon on the Mount for religious freedom

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Abstract

This article asks that we consider a vital question with regard to religious freedom: Does our response to hostility reflect Jesus' model and his call to expand the Kingdom of God? At the heart of the Christian defense of religious freedom is the call to be able to live according to the dictates of scripture, yet this places a burden on Christians to carefully consider whether we are, in fact, being obedient to the scriptures we seek to live by. This paper examines the Sermon on the Mount to reflect on the implications of Jesus' famous sermon for how we respond to religious freedom challenges and concludes that the primary defense of religious freedom is to be found in a church that actively lives out Jesus' Kingdom-advancing instructions.

Keywords: United States of America, religious freedom, responses, Christian ethics.

1. Introduction

Whatever the defining issues in any generation, there is no more authoritative definition of the Christian faith, Christian thinking and the Christian way of life than the supreme standard of Jesus himself, the good news of the kingdom of God that he announced, taught, demonstrated and advanced, including the supreme authority of scriptures that he endorsed and the power of the Spirit whom he sent.²

Central to the Christian defense of religious freedom is the desire to live in obedience to Scripture. However, if we are to make this demand, then we must in turn be faithful to the demands that Scripture makes of us. This paper explores our response to challenges to religious freedom, reflecting on the Kingdom of God and on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as a foundationally important passage, which Jesus warned us to follow lest we build our house (our church and our freedom in this case) on sand.

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² Os Guinness, *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 153.

It is common, in analyses of religious freedom, to concentrate on governmental and societal restrictions of religious freedom.³ We often then interrogate these restrictions from an accepted vantage point – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, US Bill of Rights or European Convention of Human Rights. However, we too seldom ask how communities of the faithful are responding to religious freedom challenges.⁴

In the US, law overwhelmingly dominates the religious freedom discussion, and this focus requires legal and not theological analysis.⁵ Studies of the persecuted church such as Ronald Boyd-MacMillan's *Faith That Endures* and Glenn Penner's *In the Shadow of the Cross* do examine theological aspects of persecution, detailing the scriptural basis of a range of choices for Christians who face persecution.⁶ Yet in the US, little attention is given to the nature of the Christian response.

In a democracy such as the US, it is appropriate for religious freedom to be contested in the courts and for vigorous political debates to lead to contestable legislation. Christians must inhabit the political world and advocate for religious freedom. As such, this paper is not a call for detachment from the world, but it rather seeks to reorient our focus, asking whether the church's current responses to religious freedom challenges are misguided or even harmful to the church. It is vital that Christians reflect very carefully on the strategies being employed, for it is likely that current approaches, especially in our media-saturated world, will not promote religious freedom but will rather heighten a distrust of the church and further empower its social marginalization. I believe that the most important question that should be animating our discussions of religious freedom within the church

³ The Pew Research Center's work is preeminent in this regard. See for example "Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion," <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/09/20/rising-tide-of-restrictions-on-religion-findings/>.

⁴ The research project "Under Caesar's Sword: Christian Response to Persecution" being undertaken by the Center for Civil and Human Rights at Notre Dame is a leading example of efforts to pose such questions. Yet this project is an empirical analysis, rather than a critique of Christian responses to suffering. The latter deserves greater attention.

⁵ The research which inspired this article is focused on the US, and is hence written with a US focus. However, I would hope that the biblical lessons discussed here would be applicable to Christians across the world. Much of what I write reflects the witness that I have observed from many Christians in countries where extreme persecution exists.

⁶ Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Faith That Endures* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2006); Glenn Penner, *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004). Penner summarizes the Christian choices as resisting, fleeing, avoiding and enduring. Penner contends that enduring is the most common biblical and historical pattern, followed by fleeing. Many Christians who advance a legal defense argument correctly cite Paul as a key example of using legal rights (his Roman citizenship) to defend against mistreatment. It is highly ironic, however, that they fail to recognize that Paul's actions were all for the purpose of fulfilling his mission – even unto death, a death that he anticipated following a prophetic encounter (Acts 21:10-13). Using legal defense to pursue a path to persecution hardly seems persuasive!

in the United States goes largely unasked. That question is as follows: Does our response to hostility reflect Jesus' model and his call to expand the Kingdom of God?⁷

2. Kingdom and Culture

As Christians, we must understand clearly that our primary value is not freedom to express our faith but rather opportunities to expand the Kingdom of God, for this is ultimately what Jesus' example calls us to do. Studies analyzing the political consequences of religious freedom responses are valuable, but their focus is on earthly models and outcomes. Jesus calls us to a prior commitment, and we must assess our actions against His words and model. We must engage with religious freedom issues in a manner that moves the church from political and cultural warrior, or the rather ridiculous status of 'defender of God', to being the active agent of God's Kingdom on earth – selflessly serving the world while at the same time knowing that this very selfless living will most powerfully attain the freedom which we crave. In short, the church, not the courts, must become the primary protector of religious freedom.

As Steve Garber has argued, culture is upstream from politics.⁸ The political realm is just one realm in our society, and in the case of religious freedom it has been too readily separated from the wider Christian witness. Although contesting political authority and judicial rulings is necessary in our democracy, we are wrong if we consider this our primary focus. Not only does this method misread cultural change, but it is not loyal to the gospel. Engaging in culture provides many possibilities, as Andy Crouch and James Davison Hunter have shown.⁹ However, Christian cultural engagement has too often been characterized as warfare, and Christians have too readily embraced the fear-based, loud and antagonistic strategies of the world. We have not sought to use language that the world can understand (to borrow from Steve Garber), nor have we borne witness to the Kingdom that we represent.

I am concerned that the American church has too readily adapted Pilate's paradigm of power in its political engagement with American culture. Engagement in politics itself is not the issue. Rather, the question is the type of power we are trying to exercise and the goals we are trying to achieve. The maintenance of a "Christian nation" status quo has largely dictated the American church's political approach for

⁷ Of course, many important ideas can also be drawn from the New Testament, particularly from Acts and Paul's epistles. However, covering all these passages would require a book-length treatment of the subject. This paper holds that the gospels are paramount and that the Sermon on the Mount is central to our understanding of Christian engagement in society.

⁸ Steven Garber, "The Culture Is Upstream from Politics", Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation and Culture, <https://washingtoninst.org/the-culture-is-upstream-from-politics/>.

⁹ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

the past few decades and embodies a triumphalism, an arrogant or self-righteous confidence that does not reflect the Kingdom of Jesus. It is time to question whether such an approach is nothing more than a power play that seeks control over the cultural environment by legislating against trends in the culture that make it a more uncomfortable place for the church to exist. In short, the political approach and paradigm of the religious right could easily be compared to the paradigm in which Pilate operated two thousand years ago. Most importantly, this approach is only increasing the animosity between the church and the wider culture and driving ever more forcefully the growing hatred towards the church.

We are, as Os Guinness warns, captive of the very modernity that our faith helped produce, imprisoned by comfort and a view of reality that is more secular than supernatural.¹⁰ Christianity is a documented culture changer, but as Paul reminded the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:20), the gospel is not just one of words but of power. But this is not worldly power. This is a Spirit-infused power that enabled transformation through the lives of a handful of faithful men and women. To quote Guinness again: “But that transforming power is precisely what must be understood all over again, re-experienced and demonstrated once more in our time.”¹¹ We in the church err when we leave such transformation to lawyers and politicians who fight downstream from cultural change, and we are wrong when we utilize only the methods of the world – advertising, social media and other formulas – to transform culture. The power of the gospel lies not just in believing it to be true but in living according to its radical nature.

John Stott argued that for the evangelical, Jesus is our model. His actions and words stand as the most imperative guide for our choices.¹² N. T. Wright goes further, arguing not only that Jesus is our model, but that the Church has too often covered up the calling to bring the Kingdom of God. Wright emphasizes that we are called to follow the Jesus of Scripture and not one of our own making.¹³

There are of course many different interpretations of what this Kingdom encompasses, but we principally make use of George Elton Ladd’s characterization, defined as follows: “When the word refers to God’s Kingdom, it always refers to His reign, His rule, His sovereignty, and not to the realm in which it is exercised.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Guinness, *Renaissance*, 37.

¹¹ Guinness, *Renaissance*, 21.

¹² John Stott, *Christ in Conflict: Lessons from Jesus and His Controversies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

¹³ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 7, 17, 93.

¹⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 20.

Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world, and it reigns when its revealing defeats the kingdom of this age.

“There is a very real and a very vital sense in which God has already manifested His reign, His will, His Kingdom, in the coming of Christ in the flesh, by virtue of which we may experience the life of the Kingdom here and now.”¹⁵ The gospel offers us the great promise that we need not live any longer according to the flesh or the world's standards. The power of the Kingdom of God – His rule – enables Kingdom living.

The Sermon on the Mount is a powerful exemplar of a Kingdom-oriented life, and in this discourse, perhaps Jesus' most famous one, we find a serious challenge to honestly judge our actions. Jesus says in Matthew 7:24–26 (NKJV):

Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

These words should encourage deep reflection because they speak prophetically to the current condition in which we find ourselves. If we utilize the tactics of the world, we will fail. If we utilize political tactics that do not reflect the gospel of Christ, we will fail. Even if such tactics appear to succeed, we will create a church that is a poor imitation of what Christ called us to, a church that God may well choose to dismantle Himself! If we are to be likened to men who build a house that can withstand rain, floods and high winds, we must give careful attention to Jesus' words. We are concerned that some of our methods in responding are effectively building our houses on sand, and it may well be that some of the challenges facing the church today are there precisely because we have forgotten to live as Christ lived and are reaping the rewards of our complacency towards His Kingdom.

3. Research Motivation

The foundation for this analysis of responses to perceived incursions on religious freedom has evolved from research carried out in Taylor University's political science department. In 2014 we tracked over 300 instances of some form of aggression against Christians in the United States.¹⁶ Wherever possible, we investigated

¹⁵ Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 24.

¹⁶ Steven Paku, Aaron Johnson, Abby Brockelsby, Suzanne Neefus, Carolina Alvarado, Chip Mironas, David Chiu, Kayla Gotha and Brian Charbogian assisted in the accumulation of this data.

the response by victims to the opposition they experienced. We categorized these responses according to a range of methods used by Christians to respond to threats, including acceptance, protests, adaptation, missional engagement, and legal action. We then classified the responses of Christians by how they seemed to positively or negatively represent the kingdom and mission of Christ, ranging from missional responses that sought to engage oppressors with love and redemption (which we deemed most positive) to combative, antagonistic, or hateful behavior that caused tangible harm to the witness of Christ.

We found in our cases that the predominant response (71%) was legal action. Legal action is in many cases neutral, a democratic act and a method of protecting religious freedom that many millions of persecuted religious minorities yearn for. However, in examining the “Kingdom” nature of the responses more broadly we found that fewer than 4% of responses could be characterized as very positive in their Kingdom building, where victims engaged the opposition with love and grace. A further 14% were classified as moderately positive. Fifteen percent of cases were damaging to Kingdom building in the sense that the action taken perpetuated culture war, division, and animosity without making an effort toward reconciliation. Our analysis indicates a deficit in creative thinking about how the church could positively respond to opposition in a way that pursues rather than alienates the culture.

4. The Sermon on the Mount

In Matthew 5–7, Jesus describes ways of living, being and worship that represent the Kingdom of God. These chapters give clear clues as to what God’s kingdom encompasses, and most of the messages do not sit easily with our Western mindset and lifestyles. The Kingdom of God runs like a fine fragrance throughout these verses. Familiarity with these verses can cause us to miss their truth, and in missing their truth we not only miss their power but position our works outside the Kingdom – essentially, as Jesus warns, on sand.

As Christians, we must be willing to question our assumptions and traditions to ensure we do not stray from the biblical witness. After all, as Stott forcefully argues, “What is required is that we obey the Bible. The best way to honor this book as God’s book is to do what it says.”¹⁷ The church is duty-bound to hold to the truth as revealed in the Bible, and Christians are thus “conservative” in Stott’s description. However, the Christian is also duty-bound to be as radical as Scripture commands and is free to be as radical as the Bible allows.¹⁸ As Christians engage with hostility

¹⁷ Stott, *Christ in Conflict*, 96.

¹⁸ Stott, *Christ in Conflict*, 33.

against their faith, they too often reflect the anti-Roman revolutionaries or isolated religious groups to whom Jesus offered an alternate vision of the Kingdom.¹⁹ Rather, Matthew 5–7 includes a litany of descriptions of Kingdom-style living, most of which should give us profound reason for introspection.

Matthew 5 begins with the Beatitudes, where Jesus declares that the blessing of heaven would flow to those who hungered for righteousness, who were merciful, who were pure in heart and worked for peace. Those who seek peace are called “sons of God” (5:9). As for those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. These verses offer us great encouragement to remain faithful to Christ and to His righteousness. They seem counter-intuitive, but verse 12 gives the first hint that something otherworldly is truly occurring here, for Jesus says to those who are persecuted, “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.” This is a superhuman reaction, made possible only by the presence of the Spirit who becomes the source of this unnatural joy.

In verse 13, Jesus tells His followers that they are salt and light. Salt purifies and light shines in the darkness. These verses are often referenced by Christians who see themselves as standing apart from the ways of the world yet seeking to bring Jesus into the world’s brokenness. But this section ends with the words, “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your *good works* (emphasis added) and glorify your Father in heaven.” Salt and light are not just a matter of being but of doing, and our actions as salt and light are to be of such character that “men,” not just believers, will glorify God. Salt by its very nature penetrates food to the point that it dissolves. So too are we to influence the world with our presence infused in society. This is not exemplified in legal action but in the sacrificial kingdom living that Jesus preached.

We are then challenged that “unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” This righteousness is assured to us through Jesus’ death – it is His righteousness that we receive. Yet in the following verses He describes the nature of a righteous heart, of those who represent His kingdom. Murder is no longer a physical act alone; rather, the very speaking of the word “fool” places the speaker “in danger of hell fire.” Similarly, the standard for adultery is remarkably adjusted; it is no longer the sexual act alone but lustful looks that reveal an unrighteous heart at risk of being “cast into hell.”

Clearly the Kingdom’s standards are different from those of the world. But Jesus is far from finished, and even as these statements must have shocked His audience, we must allow their truth to challenge us. We must be wary that our responses to

¹⁹ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 37.

hostility do not include hate, name-calling and denigration of those who oppose us, for in doing so we will clearly step outside the values of His kingdom.

Perhaps most important for our purpose of interrogating religious freedom responses, verses 38–42 deal with turning the other cheek when struck and going beyond the onerous demands of those who mete out injustice: “If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two” (5:40–41). How do we interpret this Scripture when we consider a homosexual couple suing a Christian baker for refusing to bake a cake? Should the Christian bake two cakes, or perhaps cut the price in half? While I am supportive of the position of non-service (and still believe that an ideal pluralistic society should allow such a choice), are we willing to consider whether, from Christ’s perceptive, this constitutes walking the extra mile? Can a Christian make clear his or her objection and then say, “I will bake two cakes and not just one”?²⁰ Are we tainted by the sin of such actions, or could acts done in obedience to Jesus’ command bring the Kingdom of God? As in much of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ approach is counter-intuitive, but this is the point: can we appreciate that the ways of the Kingdom may vary from our traditions? Jesus is asking his followers to go beyond even what those who persecute us demand. To emphasize this still further, in Matthew 5:43–44, Jesus speaks to the heart of his Kingdom in its most explicit character:

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be *sons of your Father in heaven* (emphasis added).

Is there anything more counter-cultural to us? Is there anything more revealing about the state of our own hearts and our tendency to rely on worldly, power-based responses when we are the subjects and victims of hatred? Do we love? As Ladd argues:

The righteousness of the Kingdom of God demands an attitude of heart which is not motivated by selfish concerns, which does not demand evening one’s wrong and which is free from the motivation of personal vindication.²¹

Who in the United States is the Samaritan, the outsider, the person with whom you should not associate? Who is the prostitute, the sick, who needs the Doctor’s pres-

²⁰ Cases involving provision of service are increasing in the US. These are complex issues, but Jesus’ command in Matthew 5:41 does at the very least demand that we carefully consider our responses.

²¹ Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 89.

ence (Mark 2:17)? Do we see that to be sons of God is to be those who love? We have become so accustomed to speaking the truth that we have forgotten that truth must be administered within the bounds of love. The greatest danger that we face in adopting the world's strategies is that Kingdom-defined love cannot be present.

There are other challenges in these chapters, perhaps not as relevant to religious freedom issues, but which speak to the nature of our hearts and the extent to which they mirror God's Kingdom. We are told to let our charitable deeds be done in secret (6:1–4) so as to please God, and not seek the praise of man. We are taught to pray in private, not seeking the praise of man for our religious efforts (6:5–6). Fasting is to be done in secret, and we are told not to store earthly treasures (6:16–21). All these messages seek to cultivate a people whose hearts seek the well-being of others above their own reputation.

Chapter 7 begins with Jesus calling us not to judge. This is not to say that we cannot speak out against unrighteousness, but that a spirit of arrogance that ignores our own shortcomings is hypocritical. We must therefore ask ourselves whether our hearts and mouths are governed by humility and whether we rank sins, tolerating some and not others.

Perhaps the most troubling verses are 7:21–23. Here Jesus refuses entry into His kingdom to many people. What should especially worry us is that this group of people appears to be manifesting great power in their lives – casting out demons and healing the sick, all in Jesus' name. Yet Jesus' primary desire is for us to know Him. If we are to know Him, we must be in relationship with Him and obedient to Him, not to legalism. In John 14:21, Jesus makes clear that only those who keep His commands truly love Him and will in turn be loved and will experience His presence.

Finally, Jesus presents His analogy of a house built on sand. This is a statement of profound importance. If our works are not in alignment with Christ's commands, then we will be building our house, our defense and our churches on sand. It is not enough to be righteous in our application of biblical truth to social issues, seeking political solutions and ultimately political control. This is not the victory of God's rule, as if political victory will necessarily represent His will. We must love our enemies, and the witness of this love attests to the watching world that we are of Christ. Our failure to live the radical, spirit-infused life weakens the gospel, making us less credible at best, hypocrites at worst. As Guinness argues, the "American way of life has moved far from the life of Jesus – which means simply that the Christians who are the majority are living a way of life closer to the world than to the way of Jesus. In a word, they are worldly and therefore incapable of shaping their culture."²² We must recognize that the practice of Christian truth carries enormous power: "When

²² Guinness, *Renaissance*, 60.

followers of Jesus live out the gospel in the world, as we are called to do, we become an incarnation of the truth of the gospel, and an expression of the character and shape of its truth. It is this living-in-truth that proves culturally powerful.”²³

To be clear, the nature of the life that Jesus commands is not within human capabilities. As Ladd argues, “The righteousness of the Kingdom is a righteousness which only God can give. The righteousness which God’s Kingdom demands, God’s Kingdom must give. . . . I can manifest the life of the Kingdom only as I have experienced it.”²⁴ We forgive because we are forgiven. We have compassion because He has shown us mercy. As the parable of the indebted servant shows, our Father expects us to forgive those who owe far less than we owed Him. Too often, even within our churches, we fail to reflect this reality of the Kingdom – let alone in our relationships with those who oppose us. As Ladd argues, “Kingdom righteousness demands that I have no evil in my heart towards my fellow man. It is obvious that such a heart righteousness can itself be only the gift of God. God must give what He demands.”²⁵

We must begin to honestly appraise our interaction with the broken world around us and ask whether we are falling short of the commands of our Savior. For if we are falling short, we are building on sand and our work will collapse. Frankly, we should expect nothing else, for we are very likely building our own kingdom and not His.

5. Conclusion

The 16th-century scholar Thomas Linacre reacted to his first reading of the gospels by saying, “Either these are not the gospels, or we are not Christians!”²⁶ Even as we confront challenges to religious freedom from the culture around us, we must be aware that a loss of spiritual awareness and of a vital commitment to Scripture brings a cultural secularization within the church, something far more dangerous to our witness than any imposition by the state.²⁷ Are we similarly liable to Kierkegaard’s accusation that “The Christianity of the New Testament simply does not exist”?²⁸ As evangelicals, we may be quick to point such fingers to liberalizing wings of the Church as it supports unbiblical positions on Jesus’ divinity or sexual

²³ Guinness, *Renaissance*, 75.

²⁴ Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 93.

²⁵ Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 83.

²⁶ Os Guinness, “Found Faithful: Standing Fast in Faith in the Advanced Modern Era,” in Richard Lints, *Renewing the Evangelical Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 105.

²⁷ Guinness, *Renaissance*, 115.

²⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon “Christendom”*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 32–33.

sin, yet have we also lost hold of the more difficult demands that Jesus makes on our lives? Have we chosen in our own way that which is more comfortable or palatable?

Wright argues, “The way of Christian witness is neither the way of quietest withdrawal, nor the way of Herodian compromise, nor the way of angry militant zeal. It is the way of being in Christ, in the Spirit, at the place where the world is in pain, so that the healing love of God may be brought to bear at this point.”²⁹ It might be that our greatest challenge is not new restrictions on religious freedom by a culture that is shifting so dramatically from Christian orthodoxy, but rather that God is calling for a people who will live according to the radical nature of the Scriptures they purport to love and seek to defend their right to follow. For only in living by the Spirit of God, being Jesus’ ambassadors in the world, can have any true hope of transforming the culture around us. Like the early church, we are ambassadors of a new world order.³⁰

As the Church, we are called to be in but not of the world. Clearly, there are times when we must not conform or comply with anything that is contrary to the way of Jesus and the Kingdom He preached. Yet in not conforming to the world, we too often fail to represent the heart of God to the broken world around us.³¹ The Holy Spirit will give us a curious distaste for the things of the world but a deep love for its people. Indeed, the Kingdom is characterized by our ability to love those who hate us the most. As Guinness argues, “What changes the world is not a fully developed Christian worldview, but a worldview actually lived – in other words, in Christian lives that are the Word made flesh.”³² If we live otherwise, our efforts will be rooted in our human gifts and not in the spiritual-human partnership that Jesus inaugurated.

Our failure to reflect on the Kingdom of God and walk according to its tenets is not neutral but destructive. As Ladd emphatically argues:

The primary manifestation of satanic influence and of the evil of This Age is religious; it is the blindness with reference to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How often we fail to understand satanic devices! A man may be a cultured, ethical and even religious person and yet be in demonic darkness. Satan’s basic desire is to keep men from Christ. His primary concern is not to corrupt morals nor make atheists nor to produce enemies of religions. Indeed, religion which rests upon the assumption

²⁹ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 189.

³⁰ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 164.

³¹ Guinness, *Renaissance*, 84.

³² Guinness, *Renaissance*, 86; see also Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 184–187.

of human adequacy and sufficiency is an enemy of the light. This is the character of the Age of this world: darkness.³³

Jesus did not come to build a religion. He came to bring a Kingdom – the kingdom of God’s rule and reign – but it is by the Spirit that this is achieved. Jesus’ Kingdom was not of this world, and as such it did not follow the world’s methods, empowered by the sword. His Kingdom was empowered by the Spirit. We too quickly shift our focus away from this reality to the methodology of our age rather than trusting that the power that birthed the Christian church is still available to followers of Christ today. Are we trusting God and willing to live lives faithful to the gospel, articulating a “vision of the kingdom of God” that can carry us through this time of turmoil?³⁴

Religious freedom in the US is dominated by legal defense. Not only does this emphasis distort the Christian witness to the society around us, but it causes Christians to delegate their ambassadorial role to a few. Every Christian is called to represent the Kingdom of God in their spheres of influence – family, friends, corporate life, church and wider world. Rank-and-file Christians should be encouraged to see that their lives, their choices, and their willingness to live by the gospel of Jesus are powerful agents for the protection of religious freedom. The Church must be taught that it is the primary defense of religious freedom – not by public protests or by funding legal groups (although both may be necessary at times) but through imitating the biblical record of Christian triumph that reveals victory through sacrificial love and a Kingdom-oriented lifestyle. In this defense of religious freedom, every Christian plays a role.

Christian leaders and scholars must continue to articulate a vision of Kingdom expansion that is built on the counter-cultural and supernatural approach of Jesus. History records the incredibly positive and indeed foundational role that the church has played in the formation of our society. We should, like Jesus, be able to ask those who oppose our faith, “Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone me?” (John 10:32).

³³ Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 31.

³⁴ Guinness, *Renaissance*, 23.