

As we make our way toward the Manger once more, there is much for which to give thanks. Last weekend's historic global climate agreement in Paris, while not yet enough, does mark a significant change in global efforts to work together. China and Taiwan, and North and South Korea, have begun exploring ways to end long-standing hostilities.

Peace on earth?

Well, maybe not, but there are signs of hope. Although there has been much that is troublesome of late, our own society is showing hopeful signs as well: our divorce rate has been declining since the early 1980s. Since 1990, the rate of abortions has fallen by more than a third, and the number of abortions each year has fallen by more than half. This year, the Centers for Disease control and Prevention reported that the percentage of teens having sex has declined significantly over the past 25 years. Recent events notwithstanding, crime, violent crime, and rates of homicide are down by more than 50 percent from the early 1990s.¹



Further, though many concerns certainly remain, Christian public engagement has hardly been ineffective in recent years. Evangelicals were part of a coalition to dramatically increase funding for the global fight against HIV/AIDS, helping more than nine million Africans to gain access to life-saving treatment. In our best abolitionist tradition, evangelicals have helped to place sexual trafficking on the global agenda. We have provided foster families and adoptive homes, visited prisoners, advocated for criminal justice reform, opened crisis pregnancy centers, and championed the rights of unborn children.

It's not as though all is well, of course. More than 40 percent of babies in this country are born to unmarried mothers. Marriage itself is more and more a class-based experience, with the upper classes enjoying it and the lower classes ignoring it. Racial issues of many sorts continue to cry out for justice and redress.



As terrorists do their dark work in this Advent season, many voices are crying out for what might be called "a culture of fear." While we are rightly alarmed by the increasing strength and reach of global terrorism, shutting off immigration and arming ourselves "to the teeth" seem to me to be ineffective and inappropriate responses.

While the ultimate result is yet to be seen, Germany's open-handed welcome to refugees seems a more Christ-like approach. While we as a nation must surely hold accountable every nation that foments

¹ Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, "The Power of Our Weakness," *Christianity Today*, November, 2015, 42-46.

hatred and terror, can we even begin to imagine how global outcomes might be different if we spent anything like the amount of money we're spending to kill our enemies to build roads, hospitals, and schools for them instead?

We humans are all far more alike than we are different. We want food, and clothes, and shelter. We want reasonable medical care. We want safety and education for our children. We want work to do that is honorable and fairly-compensated. So long as we as a nation pursue a policy of getting and keeping far more than our share of global wealth and resources, just so long will we be required to use deadly force to protect our unequal share from those who have legitimate claim to it.



Christian faith does not lead us to live either in fear or in greed. We are called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, educate the uneducated—*especially the girls!*—and pursue “liberty and justice FOR ALL.”

Our goal must not be to create “a Christian nation,” for in so doing we would perpetuate in time the evils of Europe’s Inquisition and of the Nazi genocide (or the Rwandan genocide, or the Sudanese genocide or the Pol Pot genocide . . .). Christians have every right to live out our faith in freedom and to transmit our values to our children, but we have no right to try to impose those values on others.

Consider Christian efforts to force Sunday “Blue Laws” on our culture as one example. It is entirely appropriate for Christians to observe restrictions of conscience on our own Holy Day, but to attempt to legislate compliance by others is to trample upon the Holy Days of Seventh-Day Christians, upon the Holy Days of Jews, and many others. Such is not the way of liberty and soul freedom.

Genuine pluralism with genuine religious liberty, for persons of all faiths and for persons of no faith, is essential for a healthy society, and “free and faithful” Baptists have always contended for such liberty. Healthy religious institutions of every sort are effective sources of conscience and irreplaceable sources of compassion in society.

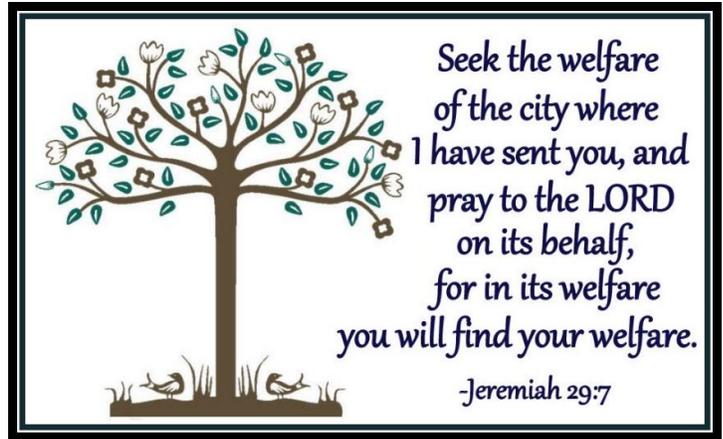
For Baptists in America, as well as for America in the world, the most effective strategy will be to be pro-active in doing good rather than to assume defensive or aggressive postures of one sort or another. We should be known for, and distinguished by, a belief in the priority of human life—for defending essential human rights, well-being and dignity for every human, not just those in the United States.

Our own culture is becoming more and more utilitarian. We target children with birth defects for destruction before their birth. We use fetuses for medical research. We have begun to suggest to the elderly and the ill that they are a burden to the rest of us and have a “duty to die.”



Rather than lecturing the world, we Christians need to show a different and better way to live in the world, which includes seeking, as the prophet Jeremiah described it, “*the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile*” (Jeremiah 29:7).

Yes, terrorism is both real and growing, but hysterical rhetoric is inappropriate for those who are children of the King. Christians should not be characterized by white knuckles of fear and anger and terror. Just remember the recent events in South Carolina, where leaders who would never have yielded to threats of boycotts changed their ways in view of amazing acts of grace.



What we need this Advent are Christians who are willing to bind ourselves anew to Scripture, to our traditions of faith, and to each other—not for mere survival, but so that the church can be the authentic light of Christ to a world lost in darkness. Yes, some of us may die in the process; but it is true today as it has always been true that for us who have been redeemed, “*to live is Christ and to die is gain*” (Philippians 1:21).

Let your light shine.

Dave

