

WE BELONG, NOT TO OURSELVES, BUT TO CHRIST:

A Theological Declaration in North America, 2025¹

Section I: Our Challenging Situation

Christians in the United States today face a grave challenge to our differentiated common biblical and theological heritage. Christian Nationalism and its alliance with the MAGA movement are particularly disconcerting. While Christian Nationalists have apparently convinced themselves and their supporters that their perspectives and priorities are shaped by their Christian identity and by an avid patriotic fervor, their overall political project is inconsistent with Scripture and the constitutional heritage of this country. Of course, Christian Nationalists and their allies simply deny or ignore the clear direction of both Holy Scripture and the US Constitution. It is imperative, therefore, that we collectively and individually respond faithfully, truthfully, empathically, and effectively.

Of course, the surfeit of destructive actions—the “flooding the zone,” so to speak— taken by the Trump administration that are fully and unreflectively supported by his Christian Nationalist base, makes it difficult to respond quickly, effectively, and comprehensively. In general terms, President Trump and his supporters have emphatically expressed the following and they keep pouring it on.

- autocratic inclinations and admiration for dictatorial political leaders throughout the world;
- attack on the integrity of elections in this country and so also an attack against the democratic ideal in general;
- plutocratic and patrimonial domination of United States political life;
- disregard of the constitutionally prescribed checks, balances, and powers specific to the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government;
- abandonment of constitutional principles of religious freedom and the separation of church and state;
- the intent to fuse church and state, the consequences of which can only be the submission of the church to the state or the submission of the state to the church.

Any one of these general dispositions of the Trump administration are sufficient cause for grave concern. Our Christian conviction compels us first to address the wrongs of the final two bulleted items. But because we give them priority under the confession that we belong to Christ, we then understand that we must also do all we can as Christians serving the neighbor and as thoughtful citizens to redress governmental wrongdoing. With this mind, which we humbly pray is with the mind of Christ, we offer this statement simply as a group of retired professors of theology, missiology, political science, and more.

We do not pretend to be thorough or expert in all respects. Nor are our comments polished and “final.” This statement is a compendium of many voices and hands. It surely could yet be smoothed more

¹ The title is inspired by the Heidelberg Catechism 1563, Q. 1, A. 1.

by one stylistic voice and hand. It could be simpler and shorter, too. But the events of the day are so compounding that we can wait no longer to communicate our sense of urgency to the church, country, and world. It does not have and cannot have the clear finality of, say, a Barmen Declaration. Necessarily, we must speak to the moment, trusting that the Holy Spirit will communicate truth beneath and between our halting, if ample words. And so, we present this document to you—our former students, constituents, friends, siblings in Christ—as an invitation for reflection, dialogue, collaboration, teaching, and proclamation in your own contexts. We also welcome your constructive criticism of this statement. Perhaps it eventually will find completion as a more refined and final publication form for a yet broader audience. We welcome your partnership in advancing our common and deep concern.

As scholars of religion who for decades have been dedicated to the formation and education of religious leaders, the times compel us to provide a word of guidance and encouragement for our cherished former students, colleagues, and constituents. Given our and your religiously plural character, we do not offer this word as a prescriptive confession of faith, though surely our ecumenical and interreligious consensus spur our attempt at a common word for the public. Indeed, we individually commit further to confessing and professing the faith in the terms of our particular religious communities for the upbuilding of our common witness to God's highest desire: that all human siblings would "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). This is at least our common Abrahamic understanding of our moral vocation. Much more, we pray that people of all faiths or no faith can find in this statement seeds for their own expressions of moral conviction. Should our readers choose to use any of our counsel as a resource for articulating your own response to the current dire situation of our nation's political order, we will be grateful and heartened. We so need mutual consolation and encouragement for the doing of faith's proper consequences of love, justice, and mercy.

2. Why This Statement?

An existential threat to our religious freedom and democracy has now formally installed itself in all three federal sectors of the United States government. The threat is religious and political. The threat comes in the collective voice of authorities who advocate an exclusivistic religiously-colored ideology allied with a fascist agenda. An exclusivistic distortion of Christian faith is a harm enough to require an ecumenical theologically orthodox counter-challenge to the heresy of Christian Nationalism, aka Christian Fascism. About this we have yet to see any denominational corrective answer. That Christian Fascism is intentionally political and partisan requires a response broader than strictly ecumenical theology. A sufficient corrective also must be historically, philosophically, legally, and constitutionally informed. Of course, we here are unable to speak so broadly and deeply. But we can voice major objections and ask necessary questions prompted by our professions and faith traditions while we invite further alliance of persons with such expertise.

We believe that our allegiance to Christ demands that we stand with and for all people, no matter their religious or non-religious identities, who suffer persecution, disrespect, and devaluation simply because they are of a color, gender orientation, economic class, or partisan political persuasion other than the ruling regime. Christ was and is on the side of those who do not get to choose sides. Christ's answer to a mere politician's question was that Christ's kingdom was not of this world, meaning Pilate's world of truthlessness, venality, self-preservation and self-inflation, a world in which the value of other persons is only that which serves the powerful. Christ's kingdom is greater in every way than the worlds of narcissists, power-lusters, and would-be totalitarians. Christ's kingdom of love is where the only totality is the love that raises the suffering and the dead to real lives of mercy, justice, and joy. Our own Christian

empowerment from this cruciform kingdom of love impels us then here to write and act on behalf of all. Christian faith is no faith if it does not serve people of all and no faith.

Having stated our impassioned theological and moral convictions, we now turn to some necessary abstractions that have codified and guided Christian life and witness for two millennia. We remind our readers of two Christian premises and one grand ethical premise that reverberates throughout humankind as a kind of “common law.” The grand premise echoes through political theology and political philosophy in the Western tradition at least since Cicero and reverberates in almost all religions on the global scale. In Christian theology we point to the so-called doctrine of Two-Kingdoms/Two Governances, the shaping of which has evolved since its origination by Augustine. Related to Two Governances, we point to that doctrine’s implication that Christians must object in any situation wherein an authority, political or religious, claims superiority over Christian faith’s essential convictions. Lutheranism and Calvinism, for example, are explicit on this criteriological point of when a declaration of *in statu confessionis* must be made, even to the point of not obeying political authorities in a seeming suspension of Romans 13:1. In *The Epistle to the Romans* (2nd edition, 1921), Karl Barth called attention to how Romans 12:21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,” qualifies all that follows in Romans 13. As for a particularly “common law,” we have in mind the trans-religious commonality of the so-called “Golden Rule,” itself a universal affirmation of innate human dignity that begat the political democratic concept of individual human sovereignty. Below (section 3) we comment further on these three items, followed in section 4 by other general observations that can be helpful for moral discernment and action.

3. Two Governances and Criteria for Resistance

Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other leaders of the Reformation articulated differently nuanced understandings of what came to be known as the doctrine of Two Kingdoms. The helpful functional title of “Two Governances” underscores the conviction, inherited from St. Augustine, that God governs in two ways over the spiritual and political orders. For the former God appoints pastoral authorities whose primary duties are to proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments, i.e., attend to the spiritual instruction and care of God’s people, equipping them (us) for faith active in love toward the neighbor. For the political order, whose inhabitants are not necessarily Christian or religious, authorities are appointed to care for the common good by protecting society with law and law enforcement, as well as to promote all possibilities for the advancement of individual human dignity and societal justice. Again, the mandate to love the neighbor is central in the duty of political governance. Political governance is to be guided not by the spiritual realm’s priority of religious faith active in love, but by love’s requirement of reason.

The concern properly to distinguish between Gospel and Law informed Luther’s iteration of Two Governances; the spiritual domain is to be ruled by the Gospel and the political domain by the Law. But that was not and is not the all of it, and to state it only in this way understates and undercuts the doctrine. That the authorities of the medieval church had so lusted for and usurped political power led to neglecting the spiritual needs of the faithful. Reciprocally, political authorities not only sought authorization for their positions from the mouths and hands of church officials. The civil authorities also favored bringing their own agendas into the policies and practices of the church. This too led to neglect of the social needs required for peaceable life together. The Hippocratic principle of “do no harm” has its correlate in political governance. When priests and politicians danced together without agreement about who led, they stepped on more than each other’s feet. Thus, the Reformers saw it necessary to delimit the role of bishops so that the spiritual lives of the faithful were again served above all else.

One might infer, then, that Luther and other reformers advocated something akin to our notion of the

separation of church and state in the United States, but Two Governances is not simply to be equated with it. First, Two Governances does not mean two different ways of administering two different but equal domains. The spiritual domain transcends the material and the political. It is eschatological. The spiritual domain suffuses consciences and hearts. It evokes from them the tenderness of holiness that comes from God the holy and wholly other by God's own choice. Further, the being of God as communal graces human beings with the reciprocal desire of communion with God and with each other. Intimate and transcendent communion with God, with each other, and with all the creation are the gifts and goals of the speech and governance of the spiritual domain. We know these as "gifts of the Spirit," including faith, hope, love, humility, forgiveness, mercy, justice, and more.

But we also know that such graces (such fruits) do not wholly characterize the demography of material political reality. In the worst cases, overt ego seeks domination. Natural communality is fractured by individualism and its obeisance to the totalitarian impulse. By history's long list of bad fruits we know this. And the consumerist impulse to feed on bad fruit leads directly to oligarchic economies and their necessarily fascistic forms of self-protection over and against the concern for all people. Clearly they have no concern for "the least of these." The Golden Rule had been regarded as a common law. Luther understood it to be the direct secular correlate to Christ's command to love the neighbor as one loves one's self. He regarded this "moral law" as "lodged in the conscience." It is also important to note that Christ radicalizes the command by urging the disciples to love each other as Christ loves them. The language of neighbor love, like the descriptive language of human dignity and the inter-religious language of "image of God," works in the secular domain in a way that a prescriptive language of a Christian Nationalist or any religious language stipulation cannot and must not.

Indeed, the imposition of any specifically denominational religious language in the secular order attacks the dignity and autonomy of human individuals whatever their religious or non-religious identity. Reformation era Christians understood this aspect of sociology, notwithstanding the basic homogeneity of their culture, intuiting but not naming what was emerging as democratic pluralism. Roman Catholicism affirms this, not least as a warrant for and implication of the Vatican II Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*). Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitates Humanae*) and its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) are deeply relevant to this discussion, too. In sum, one does not well serve the grace of one's spiritual conviction by reducing it to an imposing political fiat. One does not even evince a truly spiritual inspiration by reducing and equating the language of the spirit to the letter of law. The political sphere requires more wisdom than can be had in a religious claim of domination. Imposing religion on others undercuts the very etymological point of religion—which is to re-ligament, to reconnect all the ligaments, for the sake of the health of the whole common body.

Yet we remember, too, that religious faith and the political common good are not and cannot be wholly separate. Two Governances recognizes that they do have common values that all people can appreciate. It is not "anti-Christian" or anti-religion to rule by the common and secular terms. All can "see" this. Also, eyes of faith see that the traces of God pervade all the universe. Those differently sighted appreciate the traces and can be inspired by them while naming them differently. Augustine's *City of God*, which he wrote as a scathing critique of the maladministration of the Roman political order, still affirmed the secular as the "staging ground" for the spiritual. There were, he argued, secular ways to anticipate the final, endless, joyful and beautiful reign of God. They still are. By affirming the integrity of secularity (not secularism), we affirm a consonant political ordering that attends to that integrity, as we affirm a cordial relationship between the material and the transcendent and, analogously, a cordial and mutually respective relationship between the language of the political to the eschatological language of the

spiritual. The spiritual realm is not equal to the political realm, but does and must respect it.

We alluded above to the misuse of Romans 13 as an argument for obeying always the governing authorities. It is the common recourse of Christian literalists when defending certain political authorities. However, it is important that the use of Romans 13 to legitimate political powers is balanced by the Book of Revelation, particularly Revelation 13. There Christians who wish to participate in God's kingdom are thoroughly admonished to resist to the end Roman culture and politics legitimated by the imperial cult complete with a priesthood and temples. Tragically, the use of Paul's words here were most flattened with a non-contextual literalistic interpretation when used as a cudgel to bring the German church to heel under the Third Reich. In a non- (or even anti) eschatological horizon of understanding one cannot avoid the painful opposition between Jesus' command to do no harm to "these little ones" and Paul's words as seeming to defend all of history's Neros. This is where justifications of literalism and Christian Nationalism could be no more unfaithful to Christ. Christ reigns in and over the larger-dimensioned spirited kingdom, wherein his and Paul's words and horizon of understanding cannot be collapsed with the political realm's lesser language of law. A further description of the relation and difference between the eschatological and the historical-political is a complicated one to which we can only point, but yet for our purposes here emphatically assert. We must put this matter simply and encourage readers to study and pray further. It must suffice now to argue that the counsel to obey Caesar in "all" things means to obey only when Caesar's will accords with God's will. When Caesar counters God, there is no other faithful choice than to object, denounce, and disobey Caesar. This is another way of stating what it means to be in *statu confessionis* in even an inter-religious manner.

Finally, Two Governances prescribes mutual respect. The respect is mutual and because of the mutuality both governances must correct the other when that other fails in its duties. The Two Governances doctrine means that religion pastorally instructs political authority when it does not attend to or goes beyond its particular duties, and vice-versa. Both governances are committed in their respective ways to the care of all people and creation. This means that both governances have the responsibility to bless the life and service of each other and to instruct insofar as instruction does not commandeer the domain of the other. Recent examples of instruction of government by religious leaders like Pope Francis, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, lawsuits brought by the Mennonite Church and many ecclesial co-signers show how this can be done.

4. The Profane and Sacred Use of Scripture

Much of the theological and political crisis today has been influenced by the long practiced mal-interpretation and misuse of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It has become readily apparent that numerous Christians in the United States treat Scripture as if it were a wax nose that can be twisted and shaped to one's liking. As a result, abuse of Scripture, rather than careful and faithful interpretation, is prevalent within the diverse Christian community. Instead of interpreting Scripture as led by the Gospel, Christian Nationalist leaders and followers impose their own ideology on Scripture. They skew the scriptural, ignoring historical and sociological contextuality and ascribing post-19th century biases of class, gender, literalism (which is never actually literal), and legal positivism upon the scriptural message. Thereby Christian Nationalists transform Christ into their own patrimonial image rather than seeking personal transformation into Christ's image through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The living way of Christ with the dispossessed, Christ's preaching and teaching, and the message of the rest of Scripture therefore are often contradicted by realities in our contemporary culture and by the actions and programmatic priorities of Mr. Trump and his supporters, including those who claim a

Christian identity. Biblical ethical ideals, a basic sense of social solidarity, a concern to foster the common good, and empathy for people in need have been abandoned or certainly ignored. The personal moral behavior of political candidates is no longer a criterion for electing or rejecting those candidates. Honesty, consensual sexual relations, respect for fellow human beings, humility, compassion, and a willingness to negotiate are viewed as weaknesses rather than as biblically warranted ideals and admirable and necessary human traits. Instead, sexism, white supremacy, homophobia, xenophobia, the quest for power, and ecological indifference are promoted or readily acceptable to many politicians and a significant percentage of the voting public. The brutal and dangerous nature and consequences of some of the politicians' policies and actions are intentionally ignored. The glorification of violence and its alliance with the Christian faith manifest in such slogans as "God, guns, and guts" obviously contradict Christ's servant ministry and the consistent biblical emphasis on neighbor love. Despite their claims, Christian Nationalists and the MAGA movement are neither faithfully Christian nor loyally patriotic. Their proof-texted claim of the president as a messianic figure as justification for their agenda of forcefully Christianizing the nation is ironically anti-Christian precisely because it materially denies the lordship of the crucified and risen Christ over all the creation. Further, insofar as forceful Christianization (as is the agenda of Project 2025) per their skewed articulation of Christianity intends and imposes further suffering on already suffering people—the poor, people of color, women, LGBTQIA+ persons, refugees, those who until recently had received help from USAID, the newly and forcefully unemployed, those whose economic privacy has been raided, students whose access to education has been stripped from them, the tens of millions who will suffer the long-reverberating secondary effects of the aforementioned and more—the intention places the intenders clearly against the crucified Christ who always is on the side of those who do not get to choose sides. That God raised from the dead the crucified Christ who stood with all people abused by injustice means that God judges as guilty those who do not so stand. In so practically denying the image of God within every person, the Christian Nationalist agenda therefore is anti-Christ. In so substituting its fascist favor for Christian faith, Christian Nationalism is atheistic. In so commanding public space with its message of militaristic and now evidently imperialistic MAGAism, opting for "great" over Christ's humility of love, Christian Nationalism is arrogant heresy.

Yet, it is readily apparent that individual Christians and Christian communities who oppose the MAGA movement and disagree in significant ways with MAGA-supporting Christians have failed to propose persuasive alternatives to the message and the religious, social, and political influence of Christian Nationalism. Although public statements of specific Christian denominations and of individual Christians have challenged the theological perspectives, political ideologies, and social agendas of the dominant Christian voices, those statements and the convictions that inform them have been successfully dismissed as "woke," too far to the "left," and contrary to Scripture. As Christians address contemporary realities in the church and society and strive to foster wholesome changes, Christian siblings who have too often been silenced, ignored, disrespected, and marginalized must be encouraged and welcomed to share their experiences; their perspectives; and their vision of justice, equity, and neighbor love. That means that Christians who are members of hegemonic ethnic and social communities will have to listen before they speak, observe before they act, and inquire before they assume that their own experiences, convictions, and priorities are normative and constructive for all, including subaltern communities. Christ's words and actions should, of course, be normative for all Christians.

5. Christian Vocation Includes Work of Justice and Mercy

Disciples of Christ must not despair, remain silent, retreat into like-minded communities, or simply bide their time with the hope that national priorities in the US will somehow be transformed because

of regular election cycles, because voters change their party loyalties, or because more enlightened and responsible voices will prevail and dominate the media. Rather, Christians have been freed to pursue their primary vocation as Christ's followers faithfully and diligently in order to effect necessary changes in societal priorities, programs, and actions. Jesus clarified that vocation for the first disciples when Jesus commanded them to be Christ's witnesses throughout the world by proclaiming the radical good news of God's redemption. This apostolic vocation has always been and continues to be the chief calling of Christians. Christians personally covenanted to follow this vocation in their baptisms and subsequent baptismal affirmations. The gospel remains the Holy Spirit's means of creating and nurturing faith, and faith is the divine gift that reconciles human beings with God; makes them members of Christ's body, the church; and frees, inspires, and empowers them to love their neighbors as Christ loves them. Because the gospel is God's effective, transformative Word, its proclamation and embodiment in the lives of Christians is essential for human beings to be changed and freed to be altruistic, caring, and loving people who are eager to imitate Christ and to foster the wellbeing of the whole creation.

God's people also have a prophetic calling. God chooses prophets to be God's spokespeople within their own communities and beyond. As God's voices, they share words of judgment and punishment and words of promise and grace. The prophetic vocation has been and continues to be a challenging and dangerous one. It is essential, however, because the human condition and the systems that humans create have been consistently infected by sin. God's will for and God's promise to God's people have also remained the same. Current ideologies, priorities, and actions in our country and in our world often contradict God's will revealed in Scripture and particularly in the Christ. Change is necessary. Only God can birth such change, and, in God's wisdom, God chooses to accomplish God's work in and through God's people. Christians who are convinced that the words and actions of many of this country's current citizens and political leaders contradict God's Word and God's will have been called by God to the prophetic task of confronting evil wherever they see and experience it; of naming it; of opposing it; of speaking truth to power. Confronting evil and naming it is never sufficient, however. Christians are primarily called to proclaim the gospel and be "good news" for others. The gospel is God's means of transforming human beings into the image of Christ and freeing them to emulate Christ in their lives. Proclaiming God's good news is every Christian's primary prophetic task.

Speaking faithfully and courageously is an essential work. However, as people of faith, Christians are also enabled to accompany their words with loving and just actions, for faith inevitably and necessarily manifests itself in the loving service of the neighbor. Thus, their faith frees and inspires Christ's disciples to stand with and support all whose humanity; civil rights; physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing; economic resources; health care options; educational opportunities; and vocational possibilities are compromised or curtailed by the political leaders, policies, and systems that the majority of voters support. Engaging in the quest for justice and in the pursuit of genuine neighbor love are essential aspects of the Christians' vocation as Christ's disciples and imitators of Christ, and they exercise that vocation through such activities as voting; participating in local political activities; providing monetary support to social action, reform, and welfare agencies; joining letter-writing campaigns; encouraging congregations and church bodies to support and participate in justice work; advocating for and welcoming immigrants and refugees; fostering the care of the earth; and accompanying and defending neighbors who face discrimination and exclusion in their communities.

As they witness the gospel and point people to Christ with their words and actions, Christians are also able to provide fellow Christians, as well as the society in general, with a model of faithful, strategic, and empathic leadership. Such leadership is always beneficial, and it is surely warranted in our time and place. The model is Christ. Jesus exemplified how power and authority can be used for the benefit of

the whole creation. The incarnate Christ turned hierarchy upside down, exercised power with humility and love, and modeled faithful servant leadership. Christ also frees and empowers people of faith to emulate His example. No human ruler will be able to duplicate the ministry of the Son of God. However, Christ remains the ideal model for all who claim to be Christ's disciples, also for those who aspire to political office or, for that matter, any other leadership position. This does not mean that governmental authorities must or should be Christians or Christian nationalists. Indeed, the pan-Christian praxis of justice and mercy best aligns with the Roman Catholic favor of the separation of church and state as stated in *Nostra Aetate* and *Dignitatis Humanae*, both referenced above. It does mean, however, that all who have been entrusted with authority and power must strive to love, serve, and honor the people whom they are privileged to serve rather than employing their positions to dominate and to discriminate against them, to seek revenge against perceived enemies, and to benefit themselves rather than their fellow human beings. Christian citizens of this country would do well to expect and to urge their political leaders to manifest the leadership ideals exemplified by Christ.

Christians should also support candidates and officials whose personal traits, stated and demonstrated convictions, and policy commitments show promise of benefitting all segments of our society. To promote such ideals, Christians in the United States need not become Christian nationalists and abandon the constitutional ideals of the separation of church and state and of religious freedom. It is important to recognize and affirm, however, that Christ's example, biblical and theological traditions, and the divine gift of faith are not only relevant for the divine-human relationship. They are, in fact, relevant for all aspects of life and should, therefore, inform the civic and political commitments of Christians, including which political parties and platforms and which political leaders they support. Those leaders may not be Christians, but they should manifest the ideals of servant leadership that Jesus embodied.

It is essential that Christians explore and ground themselves in their biblical and theological heritages and examine whether their beliefs, priorities, and actions are consistent with God's will as it is revealed in Scripture, particularly in Jesus the Christ. It is also advisable that Christians and all other citizens of the United States develop or recover a greater understanding of world history and of this country's history. It is apparent that the joyous democratic triumphs of the last half century, the successful development of cooperative international relationships and economic alliances, the commitment to controlling nuclear proliferation, and the desire to respond creatively and persistently to the global ecological crisis have been quickly forgotten, intentionally ignored, or consciously reversed. As a result, the pollution of our planet continues, renewed nationalistic fervor has emerged, economic alliances are strained, international cooperation is on the wane, nuclear proliferation has resumed and the nuclear threat has increased, and military aggression rather than diplomacy is preferred. The rejoicing that the fall of the Soviet Empire and of the Berlin Wall inspired has been forgotten. Autocrats are admired, and defenders of democracy are persecuted and incarcerated in some countries and disregarded in others. The notion of patriotism has become skewed, and constitutional ideals are misrepresented or functionally ignored. A keener understanding of and appreciation for history challenges these developments, and it may inspire careful reflection on constructive and destructive human behavior and a renewed commitment to ideals that have been abandoned, even though they are consistent with the biblical heritage and clearly beneficial to human beings and the rest of God's wondrous creation.

In spite of the diverse challenges that are apparent in the United States and other parts of the world, Christians need not despair since they are people of faith. The God who is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; who enlivens God's people and nourishes them with the divine gifts of word and sacrament; who has made promises to them throughout the ages and has fulfilled those promises in the Christ; who hears and answers the prayers of God's people; who inspires them to be God's means of hope,

grace, and love in the world; and who walks with and before them and prepares the future for them will never forsake God's beloved creation. Christians always have good reasons to hope, to trust, and to expect renewal. After all, they place their trust in God, not in themselves. However, they do not have the luxury of passively glorying in their hope. They still have a divine vocation and, thus, the privilege and responsibility of being God's voices, hands, and feet in the world through whom and with whom God continues to accomplish God's transformative, life-giving, and life-enhancing work.

In sum, the election of Mr. Trump and J.D. Vance presents grave challenges to North American ecumenical and progressive Christians. The challenges are not unlike those that faced the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities with the rise of Nazism. The proudful "German Christians" (Deutsche Christen) then had no sense of the anti-christic character of their agenda, so skewed, indeed inverted, were they by their nationalistic and racist ideology. Today's Deutsche Christen, the even proud political leaders who proclaim their Christian Nationalism, are in willful denial or have no clue as to their heretical claim. It will take real Christian acts of love to heal them, our country, and the visible church.

Section 2: What then is to be done?

1. The churches must oppose verbally and through direct action the attempt to "normalize" the current situation. 2024 was NOT a typical two-party national election. The MAGA movement was not and is not the Republican Party that contested recent presidential elections. MAGA wasn't rooted in the usual hyperbole of previous national elections. Their campaign led by Mr. Trump consistently lied throughout the election cycle. Recent post-election analysis showed that the pattern of constant lying convinced some people to cast their vote for the Trump-Vance ticket. Lying should rightfully be critiqued in light of the biblical commandment not to bear "false witness against your neighbor." (Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20) Lying on the scale employed by the MAGA movement clearly contradicts the biblical emphasis on truth-telling, a commitment that many Christian churches reaffirmed in their signatures to the international Global Ethic developed through various convenings of the Parliament of the World's Religions. The recent statement issued by the Conference of Bishops of the ELCA denouncing lying can and should be used and amplified as one of many tactical pieces in strategic response to the current situation. Lying does not refer only to speaking untruth. It includes slander and pejorative rhetoric. The Churches must voice their objection to the slandering of others by calling individuals derogatory names or characterizing groups (e.g. immigrants or political opponents) with pejorative terms. One of the textbook characteristics of fascism is appealing to prejudices. Scripture clearly forbids the slandering of fellow human beings, and the Greek behind the English "slander" in Revelation 2:9 is "blasphemy." Further, slandering is directly reproached by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Insulting others is so serious as to draw Jesus's warning of the "hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22). Jesus denounces slander in his Sermon on the Mount and announces that judgment against slander will include the "hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22) and the Greek for "slander" in Revelation 2:9 is blasphemos. We conclude that lying—the essential component of fascist propaganda—is included in what scripture calls the "unforgivable sin" (Mark 3:28–30). Given that if the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth (John 16:13), and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable, then surely lying/slandering against the very image of God in every human being must be opposed zealously by justice-love.

2. The Churches must educate their membership on how pronounced the difference is between Christian social teaching and the Project 2025 document which clearly will provide the bedrock of policy decisions for the Trump-Vance administration. Much, if not all, of what is projected as new national policy by Project 2025 stands in direct contradiction to the social teachings of the mainline churches. One clear

example of this lies in Project 2025's attitude towards ecological responsibility that is urgently required by all societal institutions including the churches. What is said in Project 2025 on climate change directly contradicts what is found in the writings of Pope Francis in this area.

3. Churches must stand up against the marginalization of women and racial and religious minorities in the present administration. The toleration of the abuse of women and the return to white supremacy are intolerable realities in terms of the commitment to human rights by the churches.

4. Protestant churches must confront the growing religious nationalism within many of its evangelical communities, and Roman Catholic leadership must challenge the majority vote for the Trump—Vance administration. Church leadership chose to normalize the 2024 election without making it clear that many of its policies and actions directly contradict Roman Catholic social teaching.

5. The churches must stand up and confront the Trump—Vance proposal to clear the United States of illegal immigration via mass deportation. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops has pledged to do this. Let us see if their words move on to action. The US needs a humane policy for immigration, not the no-holds-barred plan of the MAGA movement. Pope Francis and other religious leaders, as well as our numerous church-related service agencies now excoriated and damaged by government officials, call for support of the migrants and refugees.

6. Because they defaulted to diplomatic, nuanced, and subjunctively-laden statements, the churches of the Nazi era largely failed to be heard or understood. It was mostly after Naziism's loss that statements of protest such as the Barmen Declaration, Pius XII's Christmas Sermons, and the German Bishops' Fulda Declaration became known and regularly referenced. The language of church leadership this time must be clear, pointed, and powerful.

Section 3: Biblical Bases to En-Courage our Vocations

Of course, every reader can readily and appropriately turn to many biblical passages that do not merely support "after the fact" our present concern and proposed action. The whole biblical arc with the climax of the gospel message of God's free and gracious gift of justification not only supports but calls forth our service of love in the personal and public-political spheres. Here we suggest particular biblical bases of deep meaning for us from an Abrahamic religious perspective.

Israel's traditions, many of which are preserved in the Hebrew Scriptures, portray the character of God that is the heart of Christian belief and life. That heart is paradigmatically preserved in the Shema Israel (Exodus 34:6–7). "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." God's grace and mercy, steadfast love, faithfulness, and forgiveness predominate.

This characterization of God is like a creed so that passages in Psalms and Jonah presuppose it: "I knew that you (God) are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2). To be sure the Shema also indicts inequity, and with this shifts to a significant part of anthropology. Conventionally this has been associated with divine vengeance "visiting the iniquity of parents upon the children and the children's children," but it is also a part of reality that human behavior has consequences. We know of such consequences in our American experiences of treating the indigenous peoples and of slavery. Religious faith in its use and abuse has affected deeply our

own “American” anthropology and winds yet now through the present crisis.

Our political ethics or lack thereof impinge on and reveal the correctness of Christology, too, which, of course, since Jesus expresses the will of God, reflects on our understanding of God. At the heart of Christology (and recalling again the implications of a Christology of the Cross stated above) is that Jesus turns in caring love to the poor and downtrodden, is a friend of tax collectors and sinners, and gives himself in love for the sake of others. Jesus’s remarks in Matthew 25:35–36 set a standard for the behavior of his followers: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Paul paid this gift forward in his Letter to the Philippians, “. . . in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others” (Philippians 2:3–4). Repeatedly scriptural texts urge hospitality to strangers/foreigners (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9). It is patently obvious that this disturbingly shocks those whose faith is in “America first” and who thus so blithely withhold care from the needy neighbor far off or near.

To profess and confess Christ as King, however, raises the ante of love’s risks. In Israel the king was to be the shepherd of the people who saw to the administration of justice, God’s mercy to widows, orphans, the poor and needy, repeatedly characterized in Royal Psalms. Jesus built upon that premise and set up the following contrast with secular rule: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25–28)

Spes Viatorum – Hope Along the Way

The time is foreboding. But it is not hopeless. Our words of resistance and correction may feel like so much spitting against the wind. The simple fact is that our vocations (particularly as professional leaders of faith communities) may be relationally and financially imperiled by our words of faithfulness to the Word. Our very citizenship may be tested. But no provocations of worry are final. Malfeasant political and religious authorities will strive to steal the joy from our service. They only verify what Isaiah said “here I am” (Isaiah 6:8) to before he even heard the job description. He would go tell of God’s glorious justice and mercy to people who would hear but never understand. He would have to proclaim the word until no audience was left, until it was wasted, until the hardest of trees were burnt and cut down. Even so—even so! — the word and will of God will stand forever, “the holy seed is its stump” (Isaiah 6:13) and the green sprout of justice will spring forth again. So, we praise and obey God, not Caesar, and we run with renewed vigor in the race before us.