

What Would Jesus Say to President Clinton and the New Congress

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 20, 1994, Christ the King Sunday. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

What would Jesus say to President Clinton and the New Congress elected two weeks ago? Would he refuse to talk to them on the grounds that it would violate the separation of church and state? Would he say, "I try to stay out of politics?" Would Jesus say anything to political leaders in a secular state? The question I raise isn't as outlandish as some of us may think. All four Gospels tell us that Jesus actually did speak face to face with the most powerful political leaders in Palestine, to King Herod, to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, and to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor.

I'm sure we all know that Palestine was a part of the vast Roman Empire. The Roman authorities recognized Herod to be King of the Jews with very limited authority. They allowed the Jewish Supreme Court limited authority. Exercising their limited authority the Jewish government arrested Jesus and found him guilty of claiming to be a king, a capital offense. But the Jewish government didn't have the authority to execute people. That right was reserved for the Roman authorities. So Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate and the Gospels let us overhear their private conversation.

Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Is that your idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It is your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this

I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” That’s what Jesus said to Pontius Pilate. But what would he say today if he were to stand before President Clinton, Senator Dole, Newt Gingrich, and all the members of the new Congress? I want to try to suggest what Jesus might say based on what he actually did say to Pilate.

First, I think Jesus would say something to the President and the new Congress about telling the truth. Jesus said to Pilate, “For this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” Unfortunately, neither the President nor Congress has a good reputation for telling the truth. Several years ago, during the Bush administration, James Patterson and Peter Kim asked people across the country to rank 73 occupations for their honesty. Americans rated members of Congress among the seven least-moral professions in America. Senators rank below TV talk-show hosts. The President’s honesty was rated in 28th place. Congress rank just above TV evangelists, organized crime bosses, and drug dealers in terms of honesty. Our political leaders don’t receive very good marks in the area of telling the truth.

Jesus, though, bears witness to the truth. I believe that we, as followers of Christ, have the responsibility to bear witness to the truth to our political leaders and to demand of them that they tell the truth. Tell us the truth! Be honest. Don’t cover up your own mistakes! Don’t make dishonest promises that you know very well you can’t keep! Don’t distort what your opponents say! When the government doesn’t tell the truth, we, as followers of Christ must bear witness to the truth even when it’s unpopular.

I was talking this past week to a member of the McClean Presbyterian Church outside of Washington DC where a number of Congressional leaders attend. He said that his church has been studying the Ten Commandments in one of the adult Sunday School classes. On the Sunday after the elections, a Congressman was leading the discussion on the Ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness." He began the class by saying, "I'm glad I didn't have to lead this lesson before the elections." Everybody laughed! Everybody understood what he meant. No election in recent history has been so marred with false accusations made by people on both sides of the aisle, lies told in order to win an election. So, first of all, I believe that if Jesus were to address the President and Congress he would talk about telling the truth.

Second, I believe that Jesus would warn the President and Congress to beware of special interest groups. It's altogether proper in a democracy to seek to influence our leaders, but the Gospels describe an ugly incident that demonstrates what can happen when political leaders cave in to special interest groups. Pilate listened to religious lobbyists who demanded the death of Jesus. This special interest group was very powerful. Historians tell us that Pilate had a number of previous run ins with these people. The religious leaders hated Pilate. Eager to accommodate them, Pilate let these powerful lobbyists influence him to do what he knew was wrong. So, Jesus might well say to President Clinton and to the new Congress, "Don't be swayed by lobbyists to do anything that contradicts what you know to be right. Don't do what you know is wrong to appease lobbyists and

special interest groups.”

Third, I think that Jesus would tell the President and Congress that he doesn't need to defend his kingdom by the use of force. “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews.” I believe Jesus would tell President Clinton and the Congress, “If my kingdom were of this world I would use political and military weapons to defend it. But my kingdom is not of this world. I don't need my disciples to defend my kingdom with weapons or try to impose my kingdom on unbelievers by force.”

Let me give two examples. The first has to do with abortion. Many Christians believe that abortion is the taking of human life. Our own Church, although clearly pro-choice, believes that abortion for the sake of convenience, for gender selection, or as a means of birth control is not God's will. Recently, Paul Hill, a defrocked Orthodox Presbyterian Minister, murdered an abortionist and his security guard in Pensacola, Florida. He proved that it's possible to be anti-abortion without being pro-life. On the basis of my understanding of Christ's Kingdom and the Word of God, I believe Hill's actions were an abomination. Those who belong to the Kingdom of Christ must never use the weapons of worldly kingdoms either to protect or extend Christ's kingdom.

The second example has to do with prayer. Jesus requires that we pray in his name and in his name alone. He's called us to teach our children to pray. He requires that we pray for our political leaders. Unfortunately, there are many signs that point to the church's failure to teach us to pray. We've not been very

successful in teaching our children to pray. We don't know how to pray ourselves. Prayer meetings are very poorly attended. Surveys within the Presbyterian church indicate that daily prayer as part of our daily devotions is almost non-existent. Even grace before meals has been largely ignored.

So what an embarrassment, what an admission of our failure and disobedience, when we turn to the government to encourage and teach our children to pray. To paraphrase George Will, "The government can't even deliver the mail on time, why in the world would we ever trust it to encourage our children to do something as important as to pray?" Christ doesn't need to defend his kingdom by using the weapons of this-worldly governments.

Finally, I think that Jesus would challenge the President and Congress to consider carefully their relationship to him. Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Is that your own idea or did others talk to you about me?" He also said to Pilate, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." I believe that Jesus would say to President Clinton and Congress, "I know you've listened to what others say about me but what are your own ideas about me?" And I think that Jesus would be so bold as to say, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

The President and nearly everybody in Congress have a religious affiliation. President Clinton is a Southern Baptist. He made a public profession of faith and was baptized when he was ten years old. Like many young adults his religious fervor cooled when he was in college and graduate school. Two events brought him

back to Christ and his church. First, his daughter, Chelsea, was born. The birth of a child brings many people back to Christ. And, secondly, he took a pilgrimage to Israel led by a minister. Soon afterward Clinton joined that minister's church, started singing in the choir and for the first time in his life began serious Bible study.

Most people in Congress also claim a religious affiliation. In the 100 member Senate there are 3 Mormons, four Lutherans, seven Congregationalist, eight Presbyterians, 10 Jews, 11 Baptists, 12 Methodists, 15 Episcopalians, 23 Roman Catholics and others.

I think that Jesus would say to all these people, Christian and non Christian alike, "Many of you have reaped political benefit from your Christian profession. But where are you in your relationship to me? What are your own ideas about my authority?" And I think that Jesus would say to Christian, Jew, and Pagan alike, "I ask you to listen to me no matter what false accusations have been made against me; no matter how much some of my followers have brought shame upon themselves and my kingdom. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

This morning, Michelle Thompson will be added to Christ's kingdom. Like all Christians she will become a member of two political entities. She is a citizen of the United States and, through baptism, she becomes a citizen of Christ's kingdom. Her baptism will not be complete until she personally professes Christ as her Lord and Savior and promises obedience to him. She and all of us who are baptized into Christ's Kingdom are called to a public as well as a private faith. Through us,

Christ's servants, Christ does speak to our political leaders.

In the name of Christ we don't retreat from the political arena. We call our political leaders to tell the truth. We call upon our political leaders not to be influenced by special interest groups to do what is wrong. We refuse to defend or extend Christ's Kingdom through the use of force. We call our political leaders to consider the claims of Christ and to stand on the side of truth and listen to him.

Let us pray: We praise you, great god, for you are ruler of the universe, and have sent your Son to be King of kings. We rejoice that he has triumphed over all the powers of this world, and governs the nations in justice and righteousness. We celebrate his victory in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension to honor and might at your side. By your Spirit, claim our complete loyalty, establish Christ's rule in every land and in every heart. Accept our homage as we offer our lives in the service of Christ's kingdom. He is Lord forever and ever. Amen.