How shall we render?

Thankfully, the Christian tradition is filled with models of resistance to unjust leaders.

by Richard Lischer in the March 2025 issue
Published on January 14, 2025

Century illustration

As we consider the inauguration of a new president and the prospect of an unchecked authoritarian regime, many Christians are warily seeking the rationale for a life of faith in a changed political and social environment. We are testing our religious convictions for their durability in heavy weather. We are sorting through and sharpening our models for Christian witness in the world. It is the perennial

spiritual exercise.

My own Christian American model is crafted from the prophetic power of the Hebrew prophets, the ministry of Jesus, and the lodestar I have forever known as “the gospel.” *Gospel* means the good news of God’s grace and love toward the world and all its people. Gospel is more than a model or even a criterion for political judgments. It is a reality that exists in the heart of God. For those with eyes to see, it shapes and saves people on earth. Gospel guides the way things are meant to be.

My model also includes the prayers of my mother when I was a boy, along with my father’s conviction that Franklin Roosevelt saved this country because he cared about people like us. At our supper table, stories of the Great Depression came with dessert.

The people I gather with in a Lutheran congregation in North Carolina experience the communion of saints in a meal of thanksgiving every Sunday morning and in acts of caring throughout the week. Memory plays a public role in our community—but also in my more private moments, when I remember the faithfulness of those I loved. Occasionally, I test my model against history, not only of the republic but of the way we once were as friends and neighbors.

Based on my model, how shall I practice my faith during another Trump administration that virtually promises to ignore the people who show up on every page of the gospels and every Sunday in many churches: the poor, women, children, the lonely and excluded? How can I carry on with my fellow Christians who disregard many of the components of my model and wink at Donald Trump’s abusive, destructive behavior? A CNN exit poll reported that 63 percent of Protestants and 59 percent of Catholics say they voted for Trump. Among White voters who self-identify as born again or evangelical (the root meaning of which is “gospel”), 82 percent say they voted for Trump. A majority of US Christians rejected whatever public values had accumulated before the coming of MAGA, including the importance of character in the choice of a leader and the blessings of democracy as a way of life. The rest of us are learning to live with the reality of red churches and blue churches, congregations with partisan assumptions built into their public witness.

In the bluish congregation I belong to, we are mostly silent on partisan politics, trusting, I think, that the implicit power of such words as *forgiveness*, *hope*, and *reconciliation* will allow each of us to craft our own way forward. *Resistance* rarely

comes up.

But we are looking for ways to resist.

We are well acquainted with one of Jesus' most political directives: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17, KJV). I'm afraid his command offers the misleading impression of a 50-50 split and a firewall between political duty and religious integrity. In this passage, Jesus' opponents have set a trap for him by asking a question about taxes. But Jesus is a cagey debater. He skillfully makes *God* the final word of his answer. Rendering to God is much more complicated and morally demanding than paying your tax bill. God's compassion for the poor and the oppressed, which is everywhere in scripture, defines how and to what extent one will render to Caesar. By the end of the gospel's story, Jesus' crucifixion will have enacted his own duty of rendering—both to Caesar and to God.

How shall we render? Some Quakers, Mennonites, and peace activists reduce their tax payments by the percentage they estimate the government spends on war. Others have honored God by creating sanctuaries for immigrants facing deportation. It's possible that human beings will be hidden in a 21st-century version of the Underground Railroad. In a more dystopian vein, there may be human roundups that recall the Japanese internment of the 1940s.

Men and women will defy Caesar by protecting girls from a legal obligation to give birth. We will grieve the tragedy of teen suicides and support gay and trans kids in an increasingly cruel political environment. Those of us with money may slip up to Canada for the vaccines that protect us and others.

Some of us might renew our support for William Barber and Liz Theoharis's national crusade, which hasn't missed a beat since the election. While most politicians cultivate the middle class, the Poor People's Campaign, inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s movement of the same name, begins at the base camp of human need.

At a minimum, we will keep voting, volunteer locally, sign petitions, and spend less time watching the news.

With so much at stake, the 2024 election season was among the most extravagant, expensive, and vicious in recent memory. On the Sunday after the election, the appointed scriptural readings seemed intended to go small, to refocus our attention

on less significant players. They included two stories of endangered widows: an at-risk refugee named Ruth and a poverty-stricken woman in the Gospel of Mark. As I listened to the lessons, I mentally congratulated the church on its keen sense of irony.

In the appointed reading from Ruth 3 and 4, the young widow needs someone to help protect her from sexual abuse in a foreign land, much as immigrants in the United States need sanctuary, or at least due process, when confronted by the deportation police. The “widow’s mite” story in Mark 12 reminds us that many women continue to struggle for power in the United States, where their very bodies are subject to legislators and judges.

The widow’s poverty speaks to me of a rigged economy that allows the wealthy to pay no taxes while the poor dutifully pay what they owe.

In Mark’s story, the widow and Jesus never address each other. She does not cry out to him or noisily call attention to her plight. But his eye is on her, and he tells his friends to keep their eye on her, too. Her kind of fragility is not a sentimental exception to God’s power in the world; it is an emblem of it.

I think it’s no accident that the Bible’s stories of desperate faithfulness are often the stories of vulnerable widows: Ruth, the woman in Mark 12, the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17, the widow of Nain in Luke 7. This widow-like faith is what we all need—not to rule but to persevere.

The kingdom of God does not make itself known by means of military or political power. This is a sort of thesis statement of Jesus’ ministry. Its violation is baked into much of ecclesiastical history. It is the perennial Christian mistake.

Christians sometimes dream of establishing the rule of God by means other than those God has provided: cross, resurrection, sacrifice, and determined love for those in need. In our weaker moments we long to elect leaders who would sponsor us—or in our darker moments, who would *enforce* us. All we ask is a seat at the proverbial table, an invitation to a prominent prayer breakfast, a small office in the West Wing. We idolize leaders who will humor our theory of godliness and advance it. But the responsibility for godliness cannot be outsourced to our chosen protectors. It lies with the people of God.

Nor do we suffer a shortage of politicians who will capitalize on the religious fantasies of their constituents. In my part of the country, a candidate will do a tad better if he or she is called a “God-anointed Christian” rather than a “Marxist radical.” Religious heresy and political opportunism go hand in hand, and often it is hard to differentiate the user from the usee. *Cui bono*? the law asks. Who benefits? It is a victimless crime.

During the election, Trump pledged to protect “my beautiful Christians” from persecution and, echoing his 2016 pledge, promised that “Christianity will have power.” In some quarters these assurances were enthusiastically received; in others they were dismissed as pandering. What could be more pitiful than the church of Jesus Christ, armed with the sword of the Spirit and girded with the breastplate of righteousness, cupping its hands like a mendicant to such an offer? What could be more *dis*empowering to any spiritual movement than the promise of power from a strongman? Jesus said he came to bind the strongman, not to curry favor with him (Mark 3:27).

Sometimes the work of binding occurs in unexpected places: in worship, for example. Many Christians sing an ancient liturgical chant that joyfully acknowledges who God is and who God is not. The song is called the Te Deum, literally, “You, God.” It’s been around for about 15 centuries, so you can bet it’s been sung in defiance of more than a few strongmen.

Singing, “We acknowledge you to be the Lord” has a way of disqualifying fake lords and testing the spiritual resolve of the singers.

For many generations, Puritan preachers dictated the religious duties of civic officials and outlined, at exhausting length, the characteristics of a Christian nation. The elected magistrate or governor was to see to the welfare of the people, especially the poor among us, and to oversee a body politic whose righteousness would manifest the glory of God. They proclaimed nothing less than a civic doxology.

The famous sermon “A Model of Christian Charity”—traditionally attributed to John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony—declares that if we deal justly with one another, if the rich do not oppress the poor, if we work always for the “common good,” and if our justice is tempered by mercy, then we shall be a “city upon a hill.” But if we fail to be a good and merciful people, we shall be a “story” among the nations—that is, a cautionary tale. This sermon was the

inspiration for American exceptionalism, the ghostly descendant of the Puritans' theological vision.

Of course, Puritan preachers of every generation spoke from a platform of civic power. The Christian faith enjoyed unquestioned religious and moral authority in their communities. Today, the Christian message in America is merely one voice—and a fractured one at that—in a national chorus enriched by many religious and secular points of view. Winthrop's "common good" still eludes us.

We Christians know we have a duty, but we are torn between the two halves of it: resistance and reconciliation. We are a fierce company of obedient rebels. We honor the fiery words of Jesus, spoken in his programmatic sermon in Nazareth: how he announced good news to the poor, deliverance to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed, phrases that Martin Luther King Jr. repeatedly mined for their lasting power. We carry these words with us in all circumstances. We know this gospel must not be watered down. It is still here, defiant, like a tattered flag the morning after the battle. But we also know that Christ commands us to forgive and reconcile with enemies and to see his face in the faces of those who despise us and whom we have despised.

Our situation is not a predicament. Let's not call it that. Nor is it a golden opportunity—that's far too optimistic. What we have is a new playing field for ministry. We are the religious descendants of the refugee Ruth. We have been working from the margins for longer than we care to admit. The endowment of some of our institutions has shielded us from that reality. Christian ministry operates in total dependence on God and, as Reinhold Niebuhr insisted, always in the face of political ambiguities. More than anyone, Niebuhr reminded us that we live in exile from our fondest fantasies of control.

Christians thrive in situations that beg for ministry. It's our legacy from the apostle Paul. Despite his many setbacks and disappointments, Paul could be deceptively buoyant: "Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart" (2 Cor. 4:1). I say "deceptively" because someone who promises not to lose heart is typically on the verge of losing heart. Nevertheless, "this ministry" he speaks of is not so much a set of skills as it is a grace whose versatility serves in any sorrow or catastrophe. This ministry is like love. It never ends. It never comes to the end of its rope. It never throws up its hands and says, "There's nothing more to be done." Like an old comedian, it never runs out of

material.

Everywhere you look, there is someone in need of justice. In every school district in this land there are children in danger from guns. There are immigrants in our midst, newcomers and pilgrims, fleeing the worst in life but finding little welcome here. Everywhere, schools without books, clinics on the brink, women at risk. An epidemic of loneliness and broken spirits everywhere. Everywhere, ordinary neighbors are reaching out for the solace of our hope, even when they cannot name what it is they are asking for.

Jesus once said that the presence of God in this world is a pinch of yeast in a shapeless blob of dough (Matt. 13:3). Without it, the woman in his parable cannot make a decent loaf of bread. The imagery is a part of the message. If God's influence isn't working locally—in the family, congregation, or neighborhood—it won't work on Capitol Hill. His modest image gestures a way forward.

The 19th-century French saint Thérèse of Lisieux was 24, living in a convent, and dying of tuberculosis when she was forced to abandon her own extravagant spiritual ambitions. She came up with a new, leavening formula for ministry, one focused on the ordinary needs of those closest at hand. She called it the Little Way. She did not call it the Insignificant Way. It's not the American way; it is the Jesus way that dispenses its mercies through the cracks and crevasses of a broken empire.

As a novice, Thérèse considered her kindness toward others as acts of self-renunciation. They were little exercises in self-improvement. It was all about her. As her thought matured, she began addressing a deeper dimension of love by recognizing the value of those who received her help. Her center of gravity shifted to others. The spirituality she outlines in *The Story of a Soul* sparked a countercultural revolution in the consciousness of millions of believers. Her little way both enriches and corrects the big way of agencies, institutions, and governments. It offers the taste of freedom to those of us who feel defeated or constrained by events beyond our control. The little way rehearses the essential values of the gospel and microperforms them anywhere your life or vocation takes you.

In the second century, long before Christianity was enthroned as the religion of the empire, an anonymous Christian writer wrote a letter to an official named Diognetus. It contained a series of observations on what we might call "church and state." The author gives full voice to the paradox of Christian existence in a shallow and self-

indulgent pagan society. The letter is the prototype of Christian unease in its own environment. Its idealized portrait of the faithful suggests a way forward for us, its distant addressees.

The writer insists that Christians are at home in every ethnic and economic community. In fashion and food, they don’t separate themselves from their neighbors. They fit right in. And yet, despite their full participation in the culture, they are also alien to it. They do their duty as citizens, but always with a depth of allegiance to something greater. The goodness they pursue is a goodness alien to the greatest achievements of nation or empire. The letter suggests that it is this “something greater” that will eventually contribute to the health of the body politic. The living faith of believers can redeem the most faithless regime. “What the soul is to the body,” the writer concludes, “that’s what Christians are in the world.”

Older heads have thought through the issues we face today—and with us in mind. We have been to this precipice before, and we have discovered that it’s possible to practice our faith on the very edge of it. Which is where we are today. Christians have been anointed not to rule the world but to sanctify it. Not to dominate but to consecrate. Not to harvest but to sow. And to bless this poor, broken body with some soul.