As my wife, Stephanie, was pulling out of the driveway with our son, Giacomo, to take him to G. W. University in DC, I felt a lump in my throat: our first son was on his way out of the nest on his new adventure in life. As I was waving goodbye to him, our daughter, Desiree, pointed out a beautiful rainbow emerging from the clouds. Then, I remembered God’s promise of favor to all people: no harm will ever come to us by God’s hand ([Gen. 9:8-17](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+9%3A8-17&version=NrsV)).

That promise strikes me as strident considering Jesus’ promise of fire and divisions even within one’s own family: his “good news” will throw society into an uproar. This is not the consoling and peace loving Jesus of many other passages. Because we have enough conflict and disagreements in life we don’t particularly care to hear of more divisions. Isn’t the Church supposed to be a refuge from the storms of life, a safe haven where people smile and get along? What about the apostolic advise of being one-minded ([Phil. 2:1-5](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+2%3A1-5&version=NrsV) and [3:15](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+3%3A15&version=nrsv))? Aren’t we supposed to enjoy the unity Jesus prayed for on our behalf in the Getsemani ([Jn. 17:20-21](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+17%3A20-21&version=NrsV))?

We can find in the Church the same cultural and political arguments and tensions we find in the social arena. I was at a pastors’ meeting this past week where it was evident that even pastors have diverging views on the proper response to today’s social issues of race, sexual identity, immigration, health coverage, gun control and domestic terrorism. So, I wouldn’t be surprised if we hear people ask “What do we need the Church for if we hear in church the same arguments and get into the same kind of conflicts we see in the world? Isn’t the Church to be different and not conformed to this world ([Rom. 12:2](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+12%3A2&version=NrsV))? Aren’t we better off retreating to our own safe space into the woods perhaps, or on a boat away from everything and everyone?” (Remember Jean Paul Sartre’s statement: “Hell is other people!”?)[[1]](#footnote-1) What is a Church centered on the gospel compassion supposed to do? What is the Church’s proper response to our infights? Are we to disband? Or do we want to learn what it means to be a “city on the hill” ([Mt. 5:14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5%3A14-16&version=NrsV)).

We aren’t a city on the hill just because Jesus says so. That is the Church’s identity but we need to grow into it. We can be a city on the hill only if we embody the light (the Word) of Christ. It’s a matter of discipleship, of walking closer after him. There are no easy answers to our social dilemmas because nothing is black and white and there are many nuances to life’s issues. Even so, moving beyond party affiliation and seeking the Truth is every-Christian’s journey and responsibility. Short of deep discernment and radical discipleship, the Church engages in less than Christian behavior and even embraces evil. Think for instance how the Church was divided over the issue of slavery or more recently the struggle to maintain an identity during the years that led to World War II. The question is not to pick one verse of the Bible against another: we may find verses supporting opposing views and every side can claim to be right. The question is one of discernment and interpretation: is what we profess in line with the Spirit of Jesus?

In an article dedicated to the life contribution of Dutch theologian Visser’t Hooft (1900-1985)[[2]](#footnote-2), the author writes “In his era and in ours, parts of the Church have supported oppressive, xenophobic policies, while other parts lament their weakness in opposition to them. In his era and in ours, the church has been split by fissures of race, class, and political ideology.” Looking farther out at the plague of apartheid in South Africa, Visser’t Hooft was convinced that “the church is called to be a harbinger of the new humanity in which all racial barriers have fallen. Opposing racism is not only a matter of Christians doing what they ought to do but of being what they ought to be. The very identity of the church as an embodied witness to the gospel is at stake.”

Too often, in his view, Christians first become committed to some social or political cause and only then turn to the church for theological support and justification. It’s like living with a “double loyalty” to Christ and nation, or to Christ and party. When this happens, how can the church maintain its capacity to speak prophetically, and not become a loudspeaker for a political party? Christians must start the other way around with God’s agenda: a vision of the kingdom as set forth in Scripture. This is, in my view, what it means to be of one mind, to live, choose, speak and act with the mind of Christ ([2 Cor. 4:4](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Corinthians+4%3A4&version=NrsV); [Phil. 1:27](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+1%3A27&version=NrsV)).

When we are God-centered rather than party-centered then our *being* takes precedence over our *doing*. That must become our sole preoccupation. And so from this standpoint, we cannot stay silent and risk irrelevance: when the gospel is at stake, when fear hijacks the conversation, when safety and security are sought in all places other than in God, when the poor and the vulnerable are cruelly persecuted then the Church ought to shine the light of the gospel if she wants to exert any particular influence. Unfortunately, too many have reduced Christianity to private piety or minimized the role of the church in God’s mission. The Christian faith is not about seeking our personal salvation but about allowing ourselves to be used by Christ, through the church, for the salvation of the world. Biblical salvation is never individual salvation but communal. It is not ethically possible for a Christian to be indifferent to the plight of those who suffer: by virtue of the Baptism we have received, we do not belong to ourselves anymore, we have taken on Christ, we are Christ’s, and partake in his Baptism ([Lk. 12:50](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+12%3A50&version=NrsV)).

So, Jesus is not against peace ([Lk. 1:79](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A79&version=NrsV); [2:14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+2%3A14&version=NrsV), [2:29](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+2%3A29-32&version=NrsV); [7:50](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+7%3A50&version=NrsV); [8:48](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+8%3A48&version=NrsV); [10:5](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+10%3A5&version=NrsV); [24:36](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+24%3A36-49&version=NrsV)) but his message of release and transformation (e.g., [Lk. 4:18-19](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+4%3A18-19&version=NrsV)) is bound to be divisive. We are invited to be at peace with other people as much as we can ([Rom. 12:18](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+12%3A18&version=NrsV)). Indeed by insisting on loving those who differ from us ([Mt. 18:15-19](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+18%3A15-19&version=NrsV)) and by affirming our evolutionary interdependence, we have a chance at building better communities and strengthening relationships. We don’t shy away from engaging in dialogue with those of opposing views, and we are not shy about calling out evil.

May the fire of the Spirit enable the Church to model a pathway to unity and speak, when occasion requires, with a single voice. Amen.

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, [No Exit](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/10037.No_Exit_and_Three_Other_Plays)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Kinnamon, What is church unity for?, The Christian Century, August 14, 2019, pp. 30-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)