

INTRODUCTION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer loved his time in London. At the invitation of a friend, the young German churchman, who would twelve years later die a martyr during the last days of Nazi control, had taken a post across the English Channel. Bonhoeffer had signed on to serve two small German-speaking churches, where he preached, taught, visited the sick, cared for the elderly, and otherwise lived out the role of a pastor to his small urban parishes. These were holy projects, and the young Rev. Dr. Bonhoeffer took them on with his customary intensity and devotion. He felt as if he were doing well.

Despite Bonhoeffer's ministerial success, his mentor and friend Karl Barth had clearly had enough of his protégé's sojourn in England. Bonhoeffer had written to Barth about "the calm of the parish ministry" and other pleasant aspects of his work that in other times would have pleased Barth. But in 1933, they did not. From the cauldron of his own work opposing the Third Reich and his academic post in

Bonn, Barth shot Bonhoeffer a terse, apocalyptic-sounding letter: “You are a German, . . . the house of your church is on fire, . . . you must return to your post by the next ship.” For Barth, Bonhoeffer’s English sojourn would have been fine at other times, but at that moment, a much more urgent and significant need beckoned: “Your house is on fire!”

Like Bonhoeffer in London, Christian churches in the United States are doing many good things. Some are creating innovative forms of worship; others are stepping out into new ways of forming the lives in their care. Many tend well to their sick and elderly. Mission work also continues apace, as churches I know dispatch members to Haiti, Kenya, Nicaragua, Mexico, Saint Thomas, and a host of other international places of need. Other good churches reach to communities in dire straits closer to home. Some advocate for justice in their cities. Others spread the word of the gospel to neighbors who have not yet embraced it. Still others work to secure religious liberty in their lands. A lot of churches are doing a lot of good things.

But for all our good and faithful labor in God’s vineyard, if Karl Barth were alive today, I think he’d write the churches in the United States a strongly worded note: “You’re American, . . . your nation’s house is on fire, . . . turn around and put it out!”

There has been literal fire, to be sure. After the 2016 presidential election, conflagrations in downtown Portland, Oregon, and Akron, Ohio, vented protestors' anger.¹ But the American burn has spread far beyond those few small street fires. It has singed families, friendships, corporations, schools, sports teams, and almost every other community among us.

If I were to stop here and let the American people guess what this menacing fire might be, I'd get two main answers. Half of the nation would say, "The problem is those blasted liberals. They want to dole out our dollars to lazy people, siphon the energy out of our economy with regulations, promote atheism by taking Christianity out of everything, and reduce sexuality to an opinion." Asked the same question, the other half of the country would say, "It's those damned conservatives! They want to shrink government just small enough to fit in our bedrooms, they don't care about the poor or the helpless, they go to war for sport, and they oppress brown-skinned people." Anger would escalate on both sides and soon become a brawl.

The American church has bought into that definition of the fire. Christian leaders and churches identify with blue or red, imagining that righteous political convictions license us to nurse open disdain for half the nation. When the country elected Barack

Obama in 2008, pastors on the Right declared war against his coming attack on the very existence of Christianity. When Donald Trump took office in January 2017, leaders on the Left gathered their troops to join the Resistance and oppose all things Trump, whose blatant racism, sexism, and American isolationism would, by their light, doom the land.

If Karl Barth penned a strongly worded letter to us, I don't imagine he would find the offending fire in the Left or the Right, in progressive Christians or conservative Christians. Rather, I imagine that Barth would call us to extinguish the disunion itself—division that has turned college campuses into war zones, disabled our government, and given us enemies in our own towns. Polarization numbers have risen to levels unseen since the Civil War and now threaten even to surpass those. The Left-Right line divides urban from rural, educated from uneducated, working class from professional class, and so on and so on. Maybe even more personally jarring is the way it has broken families and friendships. One tribe doesn't just disagree with the other, it fears them.

But you really don't need me to describe our division. You know it well, because it has become the way of life in our land. It's the water we swim in—so much so that we no longer even pay lip service to

becoming “a more perfect union.” *Time* magazine’s 2016 Person of the Year cover surprised no one when it characterized its recipient as “Donald J. Trump, President of the Divided States of America.” Our rift has made us meaner. It has disengaged us from one another in ways that leave us confounded before our political opposites. As one author has put it, “Intellectually and emotionally weakened by years of steadily degraded public discourse, we are now two separate ideological countries, LeftLand and RightLand, speaking different languages, the lines between us down.”²

In the face of our debilitating division, a wise Christian elder of the early twenty-first century would grab the American church by the shirt collar and say, “Your nation’s house is on fire! Your communities and your civility are nearly consumed. It’s time to get your gear on and grab a hose!” In fact, that’s exactly what I’m saying.

At this point, you may feel tempted to put the book down and stop reading. You didn’t sign up for sirens or screech. Maybe the subtitle, “How the Church Can Save the World,” piqued your interest. God built the church to save the world, after all, and if God is calling us to a new way to do that, you’re in. You feel the brokenness around you, and you’re looking for ways to help heal it. You’re already on

board, and you don't want to be scolded. If this description fits you, maybe a pastoral letter from the prophet Jeremiah to Israel's exiles will sit better than Karl Barth's harangue. Okay, then let's go there.

Twenty-six centuries ago, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, and his soldiers force-marched the people of that city and its Judean surroundings toward present-day Iraq. But Jeremiah stayed behind in Jerusalem. At a distance, sitting amid the ashes of a once-proud city, the weeping prophet counseled his people on life in their new city. Exile had left them angry and confused, consigned to the province of foreign gods, foreign customs, foreign language, and foreign food. One of their poets sang out their collective anguish, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4).

Jeremiah's response surely surprised them if they expected to hear a prophet's righteous condemnation of all things Babylonian. Jeremiah went the other way, and his words to those ancient exiles move across the ages and land in our twenty-first-century laps:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel,
to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile

from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. . . . Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:4, 7, NIV)

Put down roots, exiles. Dig in and help your new neighbors.

In every age, God calls Christians (and Jews, too) to hear and live out these words where we are, to seek the welfare of our cities. And as we do that, we ask together what are our land’s most pressing needs—what gift would most help our neighbors in our time. A wise Christian elder surveying the needs of our land in the first quarter of the twenty-first century would put “Help people come together across difference” on her short list.

Whether you want Karl Barth to grab you by the scruff or the prophet Jeremiah to coax you to engage, the message is the same. The hard truths of our present American crisis of polarization are these: The church is complicit in it, and we must consider why we’ve grown so fond of our habit of division (part 1). Then we’ll picture the bliss that we miss by our division and ask how the church could ever become a part of the solution (part 2).

The whole hope originates with a little prayer Jesus spoke with some of his very last words to his disciples:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20–23, NIV)

Becoming the answer to that prayer would bless the church, and it just might save the world.

NOTES

1. “Post-election Protesters March in Portland for Second Night,” Fox 12 Oregon, updated November 10, 2016,

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<https://tinyurl.com/ybzxnt6>; Associated Press,
“Witnesses: Man Sets Himself on Fire after Post-election
Rant,” *Toledo Blade*, November 20, 2016,
<https://tinyurl.com/y82gw625>.

2. George Saunders, “Who Are All These Trump
Supporters?,” *New Yorker*, July 11–18, 2016,
<https://tinyurl.com/yayxlkvk>.