

A Public Evangelical Reading Script

Convener: Hello, I'm [introduce your name and role in community].

[Welcome guests]

[Thank hosts and organizers]

Hear the words of the prophet Isaiah proclaimed over our Lord Jesus Christ:

“Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he has brought justice through to victory.
In his name the nations will put their hope.” (Matt 28:18-21)

On April 16 of this year, 50 leaders of major evangelical Protestant institutions met at Wheaton College in Chicago, Illinois, and the press reported that they had gathered to “discuss the future and the ‘soul’ of evangelicalism at a time when many of them are concerned their faith group has become tainted by its association with divisive politics. . .” Dr. Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, CA gave an opening address at this meeting, a portion of which can serve to introduce our Public Evangelical Reading tonight. Dr. Labberton said:

Labberton Reader: What draws us together here—and in hope—is the gospel of Jesus Christ. God’s great love and mercy poured out for the sake of the world is deeper, wider, stronger, and wiser than any possible threat or danger, competition or distraction. Our common confession that “Jesus is Lord” names the central testimony of our faith, even as it also names that to which no one and nothing else compares: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.

What also draws us here is our deep affection and gratitude for our evangelical family. As one who was converted to Christ as an adult—[this is Labberton speaking]--, my cradle identity was not evangelicalism. But as one born into Christ, the thoughtful, faithful, humble evangelicalism I stumbled into has been and is my heartland. It is where I grew up in faith and where I have found a capaciousness of mind and spirit, and a zeal for mission that tells me I am home.

This gathering is not an occasion for celebration of evangelicalism, however. This gathering emerges instead from worry, sorrow, anger, and bewilderment—whether we are Democrats or Republicans. Christians in both parties found the others’ candidate patently unacceptable, leading to fierce division. Many felt cornered without a genuine choice when the issues represented are complex and fear is

justified. This is not the first or last time the body of Christ has gathered in lament. When evangelical leaders like us gather, it is often with a spirit of optimistic hope, known for “pressing on” in the work of the gospel. For me, this is not a time of pressing on. I feel a personal urgency to stop, to pray, to listen, to confess, and to repent and want to call us to do the same.

Only the Spirit “who is in the world to convict us of sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8) can bring us to clarity about the crisis we face. As I have sought that conviction, here is what I have come to believe: The central crisis facing us is that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been betrayed and shamed by an evangelicalism that has violated its own moral and spiritual integrity.

Convener: That was our first reader [introduce name], reading the words of Dr. Mark Labberton of Fuller Seminary. The full text of Dr. Labberton’s speech can be found at the web link that you will find on the handout. Dr. Labberton feels a “personal urgency to stop, to pray, to listen, to confess, and to repent and wants to call us to do the same.” We gathered here tonight feel that same urgency. Our public declaration will be made in the form of three readings: a text called Reclaiming Jesus, a written prayer of lament, and a singing of the hymn Amazing Grace.

We have asked those who have volunteered as readers tonight to bring their own bold conviction to that section of the text that they are reading. They believe these words, and I think you will be able to hear the passion in their voices. But there may be other portions of the text that will be a new thought for them, or that they are skeptical about, or maybe that they flat out disagree with. We offer to you the same grace and freedom we offer to our volunteer readers. Except for the hymn, you will not be asked to participate in any group or responsive readings. You will not be tricked into making any declaration. If you say an “Amen,” either out loud or in your heart, it will be of your own volition. We do ask however that everyone *listens* well, including to, and particularly, to the Holy Spirit among us.

Convener: Our first text is from another private meeting of evangelical leaders that cut across genders, denominations, and races. It convened on Ash Wednesday in the Washington, DC area. Unlike the Wheaton meeting, this gathering released a statement and called it: “A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis.” It can be found at the website: reclaimingjesus.org. Our readers are [introduce 13 readers.]

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First Reclaiming Reader: We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.

It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography—our identity in Christ precedes every other identity. We pray that our nation will see Jesus’ words in us. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

When politics undermines our theology, we must examine that politics. The church’s role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government’s role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace, rewarding good behavior while restraining bad behavior (Romans 13). When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.”

It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them. We do so here with humility, prayer, and a deep dependency on the grace and Holy Spirit of God.

This letter comes from a retreat on Ash Wednesday, 2018. In this season of Lent, we feel deep lamentations for the state of our nation, and our own hearts are filled with

confession for the sins we feel called to address. The true meaning of the word repentance is to turn around. It is time to lament, confess, repent, and turn. In times of crisis, the church has historically learned to return to Jesus Christ.

Jesus is Lord. That is our foundational confession. It was central for the early church and needs to again become central to us. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not—nor any other political ruler since. If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute. Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God he announced, is the Christian’s first loyalty, above all others. We pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Our faith is personal but never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth.

The question we face is this: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What does our loyalty to Christ, as disciples, require at this moment in our history? We believe it is time to renew our theology of public discipleship and witness. Applying what “Jesus is Lord” means today is the message we commend as elders to our churches.

What we believe leads us to what we must reject. Our “Yes” is the foundation for our “No.” What we confess as our faith leads to what we confront. Therefore, we offer the following six affirmations of what we believe, and the resulting rejections of practices and policies by political leaders which dangerously corrode the soul of the nation and deeply threaten the public integrity of our faith. We pray that we, as followers of Jesus, will find the depth of faith to match the danger of our political crisis.

(Readers 2 A & B approach the mic together, or stand side-by-side)

Reclaiming Reader 2.A: NUMBER ONE: WE BELIEVE each human being is made in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). That image and likeness confers a divinely decreed dignity, worth, and God-given equality to all of us as children of the one God who is the Creator of all things. Racial bigotry is a brutal denial of the image of God (the *imago dei*) in some of the children of God. Our participation in the global community of Christ absolutely prevents any toleration of racial bigotry. Racial justice and healing are biblical and theological issues for us, and are central to the mission of the body of Christ in the world. We give thanks for the prophetic role of the historic black churches in America when they have called for a more faithful gospel.

Reclaiming Reader 2.B: THEREFORE, WE REJECT the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership. We, as followers of Jesus, must clearly reject the use of racial bigotry for political gain that we have seen. In the face of such bigotry, silence is complicity. In particular, we reject white supremacy and commit ourselves to help dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate white preference and advantage. Further, any doctrines or political strategies that use racist resentments, fears, or language

must be named as public sin—one that goes back to the foundation of our nation and lingers on. Racial bigotry must be antithetical for those belonging to the body of Christ, because it denies the truth of the gospel we profess.

(Readers 3 A & B approach the mic together, or stand side-by-side)

Reclaiming Reader 3.A: NUMBER TWO: WE BELIEVE we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, identity, or class (Galatians 3:28). The body of Christ, where those great human divisions are to be overcome, is meant to be an example for the rest of society. When we fail to overcome these oppressive obstacles, and even perpetuate them, we have failed in our vocation to the world—to proclaim and live the reconciling gospel of Christ.

Reclaiming Reader 3.B: THEREFORE, WE REJECT misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women that has been further revealed in our culture and politics, including our churches, and the oppression of any other child of God. We lament when such practices seem publicly ignored, and thus privately condoned, by those in high positions of leadership. We stand for the respect, protection, and affirmation of women in our families, communities, workplaces, politics, and churches. We support the courageous truth-telling voices of women, who have helped the nation recognize these abuses. We confess sexism as a sin, requiring our repentance and resistance.

(Readers 4 A & B approach the mic together, or stand side-by-side)

Reclaiming Reader 4.A: NUMBER THREE: WE BELIEVE how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. (Matthew 25: 31-46) “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” God calls us to protect and seek justice for those who are poor and vulnerable, and our treatment of people who are “oppressed,” “strangers,” “outsiders,” or otherwise considered “marginal” is a test of our relationship to God, who made us all equal in divine dignity and love. Our proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ is at stake in our solidarity with the most vulnerable. If our gospel is not “good news to the poor,” it is not the gospel of Jesus Christ (Luke 4:18)

Reclaiming Reader 4.B: THEREFORE, WE REJECT the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable children of God. We strongly deplore the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees, who are being made into cultural and political targets, and we need to remind our churches that God makes the treatment of the “strangers” among us a test of faith (Leviticus 19:33-34). We won’t accept the neglect of the well-being of low-income families and children, and we will resist repeated attempts to deny health care to those who most need it. We confess our growing national sin of putting the rich over the poor. We reject the immoral logic of cutting services and programs for the poor while cutting taxes for the rich. Budgets are moral documents. We commit ourselves to opposing

and reversing those policies and finding solutions that reflect the wisdom of people from different political parties and philosophies to seek the common good. Protecting the poor is a central commitment of Christian discipleship, to which 2,000 verses in the Bible attest.

(Readers 5 A & B approach the mic together, or stand side-by-side)

Reclaiming Reader 5.A: NUMBER FOUR: WE BELIEVE that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Truth-telling is central to the prophetic biblical tradition, whose vocation includes speaking the Word of God into their societies and speaking the truth to power. A commitment to speaking truth, the ninth commandment of the Decalogue, “You shall not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:16), is foundational to shared trust in society. Falsehood can enslave us, but Jesus promises, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32). The search and respect for truth is crucial to anyone who follows Christ.

Reclaiming Reader 5.B: THEREFORE, WE REJECT the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life. Politicians, like the rest of us, are human, fallible, sinful, and mortal. But when public lying becomes so persistent that it deliberately tries to change facts for ideological, political, or personal gain, the public accountability to truth is undermined. The regular purveying of falsehoods and consistent lying by the nation’s highest leaders can change the moral expectations within a culture, the accountability for a civil society, and even the behavior of families and children. The normalization of lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of society. In the face of lies that bring darkness, Jesus is our truth and our light.

(Readers 6 A & B approach the mic together, or stand side-by-side)

Reclaiming Reader 6.A: NUMBER FIVE: WE BELIEVE that Christ’s way of leadership is servanthood, not domination. Jesus said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles (the world) 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” (Matthew 20:25-26). We believe our elected officials are called to public service, not public tyranny, so we must protect the limits, checks, and balances of democracy and encourage humility and civility on the part of elected officials. We support democracy, not because we believe in human perfection, but because we do not. The authority of government is instituted by God to order an unredeemed society for the sake of justice and peace, but ultimate authority belongs only to God.

Reclaiming Reader 6.B: THEREFORE, WE REJECT any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule. We believe authoritarian political leadership is a theological danger that threatens democracy and the common good—and we will resist it. Disrespect for the rule of law, not recognizing the equal importance of our three branches of government, and replacing civility with dehumanizing hostility toward opponents are of great concern to us. Neglecting the ethic of public service

and accountability, in favor of personal recognition and gain often characterized by offensive arrogance, are not just political issues for us. They raise deeper concerns about political idolatry, accompanied by false and unconstitutional notions of authority.

(Readers 7 A & B approach the mic together, or stand side-by-side)

Reclaiming Reader 7.A: NUMBER SIX: WE BELIEVE Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples (Matthew 28:18). Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries. The most well-known verse in the New Testament starts with “For God so loved the world” (John 3:16). We, in turn, should love and serve the world and all its inhabitants, rather than seek first narrow, nationalistic prerogatives.

Reclaiming Reader 7.B: THEREFORE, WE REJECT “America first” as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal. We reject domination rather than stewardship of the earth’s resources, toward genuine global development that brings human flourishing for all of God’s children. Serving our own communities is essential, but the global connections between us are undeniable. Global poverty, environmental damage, violent conflict, weapons of mass destruction, and deadly diseases in some places ultimately affect all places, and we need wise political leadership to deal with each of these.

First Reclaiming Reader: WE ARE DEEPLY CONCERNED for the soul of our nation, but also for our churches and the integrity of our faith. The present crisis calls us to go deeper—deeper into our relationship to God; deeper into our relationships with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; deeper into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk.

The church is always subject to temptations to power, to cultural conformity, and to racial, class, and gender divides, as Galatians 3:28 teaches us. But our answer is to be “in Christ,” and to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable, and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2)

The best response to our political, material, cultural, racial, or national idolatries is the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). Jesus summarizes the Greatest Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:38). As to loving our neighbors, we would add “no exceptions.”

We commend this letter to pastors, local churches, and young people who are watching and waiting to see what the churches will say and do at such a time as this.

Our urgent need, in a time of moral and political crisis, is to recover the power of confessing our faith. Lament, repent, and then repair. If Jesus is Lord, there is always space for grace. We believe it is time to speak and to act in faith and conscience, not because of politics, but because we are disciples of Jesus Christ—to whom be all authority, honor, and glory. It is time for a fresh confession of faith. Jesus is Lord. He is the light in our darkness. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Convener: Our second text is a prayer of lament and repentance based on the priestly function of the people of God modeled for us by the Old Testament prophet Daniel. In Daniel Chapter 9, we see that Daniel discerned his times in light of Scripture and “turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.” He was, in the words of verse 20, “speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the Lord my God for his holy hill.” Shortly thereafter the angel Gabriel appears to Daniel and reveals two things, both of which are relevant to today’s moment in American evangelical history: first, God moves to action on the prayers of lament and repentance, and secondly, spiritual warfare with the adversarial forces of evil is a dynamic in the world of kings and governors.

As with any written or group prayer, please listen intently and agree at the end of a particularly meaningful line, perhaps with a silent or whispered “amen.” If you encounter a line that unsettles you, or that you may disagree with as worded, just let it pass for the moment. If you are triggered by something, acknowledge the trigger like a bookmark, and then return to that line later with curiosity. Ask God: “Why has this one line affected me so?” This particular prayer was written during the Lenten season of 2018 by Tim Peverill of Manhattan, Kansas. It is read tonight by [introduce one reader].

Prayer Reader: *(Note: please assume a tone of lament and repentance as you read.)*

Almighty and merciful Father;
we humble ourselves before you and ask for your mercy.

We have erred again and again and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.
We have paved paths to destruction.

We are diseased and there is no health in us.

Maker and judge of all, we acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness
which we have committed.

We do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of
them is grievous to us.

Have mercy on us, have mercy on us, most merciful Father; forgive us, we pray.

You have established us in a land of plenty, where we have built palaces of pride and
monuments to our glory.

But the walls of your temple are broken down, lying in ruins about us.
And the nations mock your holy name because of us.

We have sinned with our eyes.

We have entertained ourselves in the glow of the celebration of fools, inviting them into our homes.

We have made their names large, freely giving them our attention and affection.

We have allowed the filthy to capture children and use them for evil.

We have used the daughters of our neighbors, treating them as objects of lust.

We have sinned with our tongues, whining and complaining that we do not have enough. We have dispossessed the weak from the land, stealing their birthright and falsely telling our children that it was meant for them.

We slander those who do not look like us, having enslaved their mothers and fathers.

We have grumbled against those who have arrived late.

We have belittled the frail for their weaknesses, refusing to admit that it was us who crippled them.

We have mocked the poor and their maker,

We have favored the rich and the white in our courts and defended the wanton abuses of those appointed to serve and protect.

We have fallen short, O Lord, for oppression has not moved us to action.

We have sinned with our hands.

We have trashed and defiled your creation that has been entrusted to us.

We have stripped your bountiful land and torn the life from it.

We have poisoned the waters above and waters below.

We have hounded and abused your wondrous creatures.

We have gorged ourselves on the resources of the earth, beyond satiety, belching out the carbon of our excess.

But toward those who feel the pain of the land, we offer scorn, refusing their calls to heal it.

Our sins are many and grievous to you, but as for me and my house, we have served ourselves.

We have refused to take the blame and have shaken off the shame of our neglectfulness.

For we were entrusted with much but we cared only little

We repent for what we have done, for the service and sacrifice we have given to idols.

We turn from the seducer, the enemy of our souls.

In this moment, we renounce Satan and all his works.

We renounce his tools and tricks.

We renounce his food and drink.

We renounce his empty word.

Help us to heal those that we and our nation have harmed.

Help us to restore what our fathers have stolen.

Help us repair what our mothers have broken.

Do not forsake us Lord, nor let us settle apart from your tent in this land of anger.

Have mercy. Have mercy on us we pray.

Convener: Our third and final text is a singing of the classic hymn: Amazing Grace.

Amazing Grace is our concluding and conclusive declaration of the unity we share with all who profess the name of Jesus Christ.

The word evangelical comes from a Greek word—*euangelion*—which simply means “good news.” The song Amazing Grace is simply good news told from the perspective of the author, John Newton, who was a former slave trader, who discovered in the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the forgiveness of his sins and a newness of life in him. “We once were lost; but now we’re found. Were blind, but now we see.” And that’s all we evangelicals mean by that word *evangelism* too. It comes from the same root word – “Good news.” Jesus Christ and his church extends the invitation: “Come, listen, and believe, and join us as we live out this good news during these troubled times and on into the world to come.”

Our song leader is [introduce song leader.]

Song Leader:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Convener: It is in the hope of God's Amazing Grace that we have come together today. It is in confidence of *his* strength that we go out.

We encourage you all to devote yourselves to prayer and to deeds of mercy. We encourage all to *listen* to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, to be bold in your *laments*, to *confess* your contribution to the sins of our nation and our churches, and to *declare* your intent to follow where the Spirit leads.

Thank you for coming. Thank you for cultivating hope. Feel free to stick around and meet some like-minded people in your community. Feel free to pray together in groups as you are led. Talk to me if you would like to organize one of your own Public Evangelical Readings, something which you can conduct even in a venue as small as your living room. Talk to me if you are willing to help disseminate Public Evangelical Readings to other communities in the United States.

God bless you. You are very dear to God.