

Reformation Legacy, Las Vegas Edition

The terrorist attack nearly a week ago in Las Vegas killing 59 people and injuring hundreds of others has the potential to leave our country numb and afraid. This latest incident of gun violence has reawakened the all too familiar chorus of "sending thoughts and prayers," demands for "gun control now," and the cold water call that "people who want to kill people are going to find a way no matter the laws." Tragic as it is, what happened in Las Vegas and the subsequent rehearsal of the same circular arguments provides a stark reminder why we must study history and learn how other Christians have attempted to be faithful disciples of Christ in crisis situations. You can find prayers and responses from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) here:

<http://pres-outlook.org/2017/10/prayer-las-vegas/>

<http://pres-outlook.org/2017/10/presbyterian-disaster-assistance-issues-prayer-following-las-vegas-massacre/>

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/presbyterian-church-leaders-react-mass-shooting-las-vegas/>

The Reformers, Luther and Calvin in particular, dusted off an old idea from Saint Augustine, the idea of the two kingdoms. Augustine, in "The City of God," writing after Rome fell to the Goths said Christians are at once citizens of the kingdoms of earth (like Rome or the United States) and citizens of kingdom of God; quite often these citizenships are in tension. For Luther, Calvin, and other reformers, Augustine's idea was important because to protest the Catholic Church as the Protestants were doing was to also protest the monarchy, most if not all of which claimed to be divinely appointed. Their citizenships in the kingdoms of earth were at odds with their citizenship in the kingdom of God. The most powerful example of navigating this tension that I can think of comes in the preface of Calvin's Institutes (which he revised countless times, but even after the King of France died Calvin left the same preface). In the preface, Calvin lays out the case for the Protestants, why the movement shouldn't be a threat to the monarchy, and then he ends by reminding the King that even the King of France is subject to the King of Kings--that is the king's earthly citizenship is secondary to his citizenship in the kingdom of God.

As Christians, we believe Jesus when he says the "Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). We believe God's kingdom is breaking into the world and Jesus' resurrection is the primary sign of God's kingdom. We believe we are called to partner with God in bringing about God's kingdom. Citizenship in God's kingdom must always take first place. For instance, we can acknowledge that hate speech is protected by the United States Constitution as free speech and still weep that children of God, people who bear the image of God are the targets of hate-filled speech. In the same way, let us acknowledge as U.S. citizens that gun ownership is protected by the second amendment, even while we partner with God to bring about God's kingdom on earth for in God's kingdom, weapons of war have no purpose and so they are transformed into farming equipment.

"God shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4)

Let us weep for the dead and the wounded. Let us ask forgiveness from God. Let us partner with God for the kingdom of God is still at hand even if tragedy and violence tell us differently.

Pastor Mike