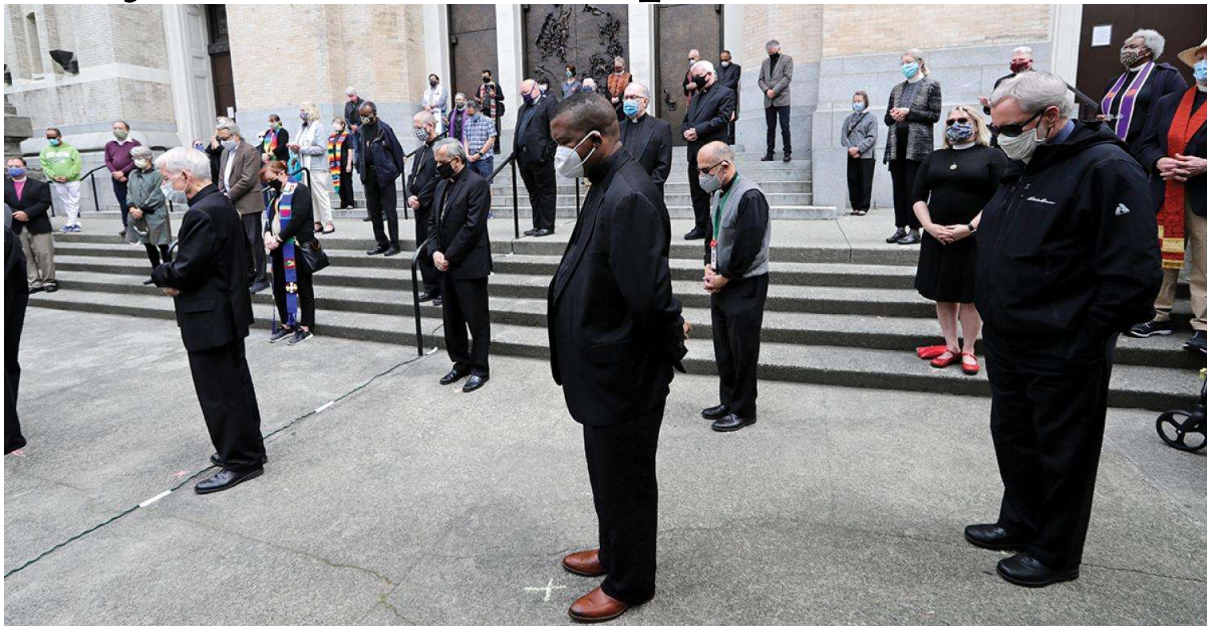


Why do Christians protest?



Clergy members at a protest in June on the steps of St. James Cathedral in Seattle (AP Photo / Elaine Thompson)

Benjamin D. Wayman

Benjamin D. Wayman teaches theology at Greenville University and is a pastor at St. Paul's Free Methodist Church in Greenville, Illinois.

Rather than seeing protest as an exception to the rule of normal life, Christians in America should see protest as part of our necessary proclamatory action that Jesus is Lord in a world that lives otherwise. We protest people and presidents who disparage the image of God in other human beings. We protest policies and practices that fall short of love of neighbor. We protest systems and patterns that privilege some and exploit others. We protest the politics of a world that killed the author of life and is dead set on killing his disciples.

The Bible gives Christians good reason to embrace protest as an ordinary form of Christian action. Scripture records how God's people protested oppressive rulers, unjust laws, degrading social systems, exploitative policies, and government-enforced idolatry. The Bible is replete with examples, too many to count, but here are a few: Shiphrah and Puaah's civil disobedience to the Pharaoh's command to kill Hebrew boys at their birth (Exod. 1:8–22); Moses' plagues to protest slavery (Exod. 5–12); Isaiah's naked protest (for three years!) against Egypt and Ethiopia (Isa. 20); Ezekiel's protest in packing his bags and staging an exile (Ezek. 12:1–16); Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's refusal to worship King Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue

(Dan. 3), and the list goes on. The people of God protested a world that fell short of God's shalom.

The first chapters of the Gospel of Luke read like a musical: any time something important happens, people break into song. And all the songs are protest songs. Luke's vision of the gospel is that God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is forming a "people prepared for the Lord" (1:17), a people courageous and loving enough to not leave the world as it is but to offer it a new way to live together. The gospel authors call this new kind of living the kingdom of God.

The preeminent song in the Gospel of Luke is sung by Mary, the mother of God. Mary's song is programmatic for what's to come in Luke's story. As a song of protest, the Magnificat both announces and foreshadows the protest that is the coming kingdom of God. Mary's protest song is one of the earliest vehicles for the gospel. It announces that Jesus is king and Herod is not. She rejoices in the proud being scattered, the powerful brought down, the lowly lifted up, the hungry fed, and the rich sent away empty. The Magnificat is a song of political revolution.

After all, it is a song about Jesus, God's perfect protest. In his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus' life was a peaceful protest to a world bent on war. The incarnation is God's protest against the grip of sin, the terror of death, and the reign of the devil. Jesus' life showed the world an alternative to the power politics that always end in violence and death. In a world that crucified the God who came in protest, our faithful imitation of Jesus means becoming a people of protest.

God's plan is to prepare a people whose politics is centered on the kingdom of God. This God-shaped politics threaten the powers that be, powers that would have us place our faith and loyalty in them. In the case of the Roman Empire, this meant worshiping the emperor as a god. In our case, perhaps it means that we misplace our hope in presidential politics.

I don't mean that Christians should become apolitical. I mean that we are political specifically because, like Jesus, we are passionately concerned with people and the world God has created. Our faith does not align with any political party, but our politics displays how we choose to live together. As Christians we are commanded to live with our neighbor in love, to pray for our enemies, and to bless those that persecute us. It's a peculiar politics, but it's the politics of the kingdom of God.

The politics of God's kingdom is at odds with the politics of this world, which is why protest is a holy practice of God's people. In this sense, all Christian witness is a form of protest in the face of the world's death-dealing ways. Given that all authentic Christian witness is a form of protest, and given how replete the Bible is

with explicit acts of protest, it is odd how many contemporary Christians are wary of such movements today.

Despite the qualms Christians may have about the nature, timing, form, or urgency of a particular protest, there is ample biblical evidence to encourage Christians to protest. I wonder what verdict American Christians would bring to Jesus' protest in the temple. Luke tells us that Jesus drove out "those who were selling things there," calling them robbers as he read them into the prophecy of Jeremiah. The Greek word Matthew and Mark use to describe this same event involves "overthrowing" tables and seats, leaving them in "ruins." Jesus' protest was catastrophic. One wonders if Jesus' action fulfills Mary's song that protested the powerful and announced their overthrow from their thrones.

John adds that Jesus' prophetic action in the temple was carried out with a "whip of cords" that he used to drive out the sheep and cattle. Christians often misunderstand this story as an example of Jesus being angry and violent, but this story is not about Jesus' emotions. It's about prophetic action. Luke makes clear that Jesus' protest in the temple was a witness to the people of Jerusalem that they had not recognized their visitation from God.

Christian protest witnesses to the reality that all is not well in our world, and it announces the good news that the kingdom of God is near. In this kingdom the poor are blessed, the hungry are fed, enemies are loved, captives are released, the blind are healed, and the oppressed are set free. The kingdom of God is good news to the poor and downtrodden, our Gospel authors repeatedly remind us. This does not bode well for Christians who are rich and powerful, which is perhaps why protests of the biblical sort are unwelcome among those of us who have been conformed to the kingdoms of this world.

Christians protest because God protests. While the church's calling can't be reduced to today's forms of political activism, protest is fundamental to our discipleship. Being the people of God may include conventional forms of protest. But the whole of Christian life is a witness in protest. In this sense, the church doesn't protest; the church is a protest. Sometimes we join secular protests, but we only do so as part of our ongoing witness that God wants to mend our broken world. Christians protest because we worship God's perfect protest, Jesus the Messiah of God.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Why do Christians protest?"