

IT'S TIME FOR THE SILENT GIANT TO SPEAK UP!

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men and women. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light so shine before men and women that they may see your good deeds and praise your father who is in heaven. Matthew 5:13-16

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Luke 4:18-19

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If anyone has read the paper or listened to the news lately, then you know that our world is in a mess as corporate executives continue to lie, commit fraud and steal from their corporations and the clients. Children are missing and murdered everyday. People are being set out on the street, not in the hood where we are used to seeing it, but in middle class neighborhoods.

Probably the most disturbing article I've read in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution in recent times asserts that the religious community has become a "silent" giant. The implications of that statement are devastating when we realize that the church, especially the Black church, needs to say something, when we consider the fact that:

- 790,000 Black men and boys are in prison, and privatized prisons are making a great profit housing us.
- The percentage of young jobless Black men continues to increase, part of a trend that in general hasn't abated in decades. In 2000, about 65% of Black male high-school dropouts had no jobs, either because they couldn't find work or because they were in jail. By 2004, the studies found that number had grown to 72%. The numbers for young black men were higher than for Whites and Hispanics similarly affected.
- 70% of Black babies are born to unwed mothers
- 320,000 Black babies are aborted annually

- Though African Americans make up only 13% of the population, we account for more than 50 % of all new cases of HIV. That infection rate is 8 times the rate of whites. What is even more shocking is 70% of all newly diagnosed HIV-positive women in the United States are Black women; Black women are 23 times more likely to be diagnosed with AIDs than White women, with heterosexual contact being the overwhelming method of infection.

Somebody needs to say something. I am not referring to politicians talking rhetoric, making campaign promises many have no intentions of keeping. I'm not talking about a panel discussion on the subject or continued dialogue among denominational bodies that turn into documents shelved in archives as evidence that the issue has at least been addressed. It's time for the people of God to speak up.

The world needs to hear from the church because many believe that the church is irrelevant, that we are indeed a silent giant, with no desire and no power to change anything. Many continue to believe that "religion is the opiate of the people," that all we care about is gathering on Sunday morning to sing, shout, listen to a good sermon, and go back to business as usual.

This assessment of the church does not square with what Jesus says in Matthew 5:13-16, *"You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world."*

Jesus spoke these words for the benefit of his disciples, then and now, as he sat on the mount and taught the Kingdom principles and practices by which we are to operate in the world. He wanted us to know who we are. He was paying us a high compliment.

Though salt and light are common substances in our world today, in the ancient world, salt was highly valued. The Greeks called salt "divine." The Romans said there was nothing more useful than sun and salt, *nil utilius sole et sale*. Being salt and light makes us powerful and influential. The world may not know; they may not recognize who we are; but they didn't recognize and acknowledge Jesus for who He was and what He represented until He "showed" them.

When Jesus came into the world, he came as light to dispel the darkness. The world then and now is pervaded with darkness. Darkness symbolizes evil and ignorance, sin and oppression, devastation, dishonesty, despair and death. The prophet Isaiah foretold what Christ's coming into the world would mean with the words,

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light

has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

Jesus said of himself,

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk

In darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

Anyone who claims to follow Jesus is rescued from darkness, given light and understanding to make right decisions and choices along with power to walk in the light as he is in the light, becoming in the words of Paul, “the new light.”

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord

Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all

Goodness, righteousness and truth). Find out what pleases

the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness

rather expose them.” (Ephesians 4:

Jesus said emphatically,

You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.

When Jesus made this statement, he wanted to make clear our position and responsibility in the world. He wants us to understand that we have a moral obligation to be “different.” We cannot think like others think, operate like they operate, and ignore the desperate circumstances and cries of the people made evident by their behavior.

We dare not act as if what happens to the people around us is not our concern, saying to ourselves as long as it does not happen to me and mine, I don’t need to get involved.

We are already involved by virtue of the fact that this is “our” Father’s world; we are here charged with the responsibility and given the authority to keep it on track. We dare not sleep on our watch while the rest of the world self-destructs.

We are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world.

Salt as you know is a preservative! When rubbed into meat, it keeps it from spoiling. This is the kind of influence that Christians are to have in the world. Without our godly presence and participation in the world, this thing will spoil; the evidence is all around us.

The reality is in this post modern world, what we are experiencing are changes in our society that include but certainly are not limited to a significant crisis, culturally and spiritually.

“The heart of the cultural crisis”, says George Barna, “is the struggle to determine the values of a nation. It appears that the defining element in the process of reconfiguring the culture has been a progressive movement to re-conceptualize moral truth.”

We now define what is right and what is wrong quite differently than we did before. Our view of morality, ethics, the role and character of humankind has reshaped personal relationships, marketplace activity and personal perspective regarding the meaning and purpose of life. In other words, as was the case in the day of Judges, everyone is doing what seems right in his or her own eyes.

On one of my airline trips, I sat next to a woman who told me her sad story. She was divorced from her husband of 41 years after he admitted to having a ten year affair with his secretary. When she asked him how he could do such a thing, his reply was, “I haven’t done anything wrong, everybody’s doing it.” He’s right. Everybody is doing whatever makes them happy. This is what our individualistic and self centered society gives folks permission to do. Whatever!

Martin Luther King said, “We have adopted a relativistic ethic.

We have accepted the attitude that right and wrong are merely relative. Most people cannot stand up for their convictions; because the majority of people might not be doing it. If everyone else is doing it, it must be right.”

The reality is there are no absolutes. The Bible that once provided guidelines for how one should govern his/her life has become for many not a source of authority but rather a document of antiquity. The nation that still asserts, *In God, we trust*, has in many ways, strayed from the godly principles and values that once determined the moral climate and the morality of our nation.

Many churches curse the moral and spiritual failure of our times and work furiously to turn back the hand of time. But the sheer numbers of non-Christians, along with the pluralistic and tolerant mood of the times seems to make the battle futile.

Other churches have adopted a defensive posture in an effort to protect the truth and themselves from the secular onslaught; building walls thick and moats deeper to somehow keep the deadly perils from the outside from coming in. We may think that we are safe inside stain-glassed windows and buildings with steeples, but we aren’t!

There is another phenomenon taking place in some of our churches that focuses on personal piety and prosperity over against cooperative responsibility. It's all about the individual and their personal relationship with God and well-being, as if it doesn't matter what is going on in the rest of the world.

We are more affluent than we have ever been. We think we have arrived with our positions in corporate America, fine homes and cars. We attend churches where preachers tell us that we have acquired all of this through the favor of God and favor ain't fair. It is because we have sowed in good ground by faith and prayed with authority demanding of God what He has promised us that we are blessed while others are not. In our prayers, we have been taught to pray for God to enlarge **my** territory rather than, "Give us today our daily bread. It's all about us! We have forgotten in the words of Dr. King.

"That all of life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

In other words, we're in this thing together. When one of us is hurting, all are hurting. We are our brother's and sister's keeper. None of us can be free until all of us are free.

The church must be reminded that if God had wanted to, he could easily have transferred His people to a place of safekeeping until his kingdom was established on earth, but God did not choose to do that. God left us in the world to be salt and light, to make a difference, to set a standard, to transform people, and establish God's Kingdom on earth.

The Kingdom of God as you well know is the place where love is the basis of every relationship, righteousness reigns, justice and equality for all is the order of the day, and everyone's dignity and rights are safeguarded and assured. We cannot ignore the people of the world, pretending that they and their attitudes, actions and activities don't matter. Nor can we be tolerant like the rest of society. Though we are in the world, we are not of it. This world is our mission field. We are called to bring people out of darkness into the marvelous light.

The nature of our mission is to release people from both spiritual and material oppression and bondage. The sad reality is though we live in the wealthiest nation in the world, there is an unequal distribution of the wealth. There are a significant number of persons who are what Jesus calls the *least of these*.

The “least of these” are those who find themselves in a vulnerable or helpless condition. They are folks who cannot fully provide for or take care of themselves and their needs. The “least of these” are those who are going through financially and materially difficult periods in their lives. They lack the resources they need to live a quality life.

The least of these are hungry! It is hard to believe that people living in a prosperous country, like America, where tons of food is thrown away everyday, are hungry, but there 33 million households including 13 million children experiencing hunger or the risk of hunger. For too many Americans, food is an “unaffordable” luxury. One out of three had to choose between paying their rent and buying food. Seniors have to decide whether to buy food or medicine.

Children deprived of an adequate diet are at a greater risk than other low income children of not reaching their full potential as individuals. Children who go to school hungry and undernourished can’t think and can’t concentrate. They find it hard to bond with other children and are more susceptible to disease and thus are forced to be absent from school. These children are at greater risks of dropping out of school. Therefore, they are not able to compete in this society for the best jobs, if any job, possibly ending up on the streets or locked in a life of crime and/or prison.

Military families are some of the most vulnerable of the working poor. They do not make enough money to make ends meet and so they like many others have to depend on food stamps to survive. Why should individuals and their families who are risking their lives for our freedom have to figure out how to eat?

The least of these are in prison. Though African Americans comprise only 13% of the national population, we are 80% of the people arrested, 41% of the people in jail and 49% of those in prison. The majority of these are our men. We do longer sentences for the same crime and we do the time. Probation and parole are not easily handed out to us.

The least of these are people who are hurting and helpless, living on the edge, threatening to give up hope, because life has placed them in a position of having to depend on someone else if they are going to make it and they are wondering who that someone is. Food, shelter, clothing, affordable healthcare, equitable education, and hospitality and concern are the basic needs of every individual and as the church - we are called!

As African Americans, we understand the role of religion and the church in the struggle for freedom and justice for all humankind. Our ancestors were shipped from our native land to distant strange shores, forbidden to practice organized religion. Nevertheless, they adopted the religion of

their slave owners, understanding that the God who they were told had created them inferior and to live in subjection had in fact, created all persons in his image and likeness with dignity and worth. They also understood that “by faith” God would carry them through!

By faith, we sat in their churches for as long as we could and then with an unshakable faith that would not let us be still, we walked out, established our own churches, using the slave owner’s religion to defeat their oppression of us.

The churches that we as African Americans have established have been the incubators for men and women to rise up and fight against segregation and oppression for millions.

It was the Black church that spawned such freedom fighters as Sojourner Truth, Denmark Vessey and Henry McNeal Turner. It was the Black Church that produced intellectuals and activists such as Rosa Parks, Martin and Coretta King, Howard Thurman and Fred Shuttlesworth. The

Black church has prepared men and women throughout our history who were not afraid to speak out against the evils of injustice and speak up for justice and freedom for all.

It was the Black church that provided the vision, the money, the protective structure and the personnel for the greatest social movement in American History the Civil Rights movement that continues to this day.

Martin Luther King, Jr., the designated spokesperson for the movement, who was first and foremost a Baptist preacher and a pastor, both challenged and chastised the church. He preached that the church has a mandate from God himself to set the captives free..., because the Spirit of the Lord is upon us. He found the church wanting because of her failure to challenge the status quo. In his well-known sermon, *A Knock at Midnight*, he asserted that it was midnight in our world and in the social order and that millions of people need to feel that the church provides an answer to the deep confusion in their lives. He further said and I quote,

“The church is the conscious of America. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and not its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral and racial authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause men everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening

status quo and recover its great historic mission, it will speak and act fearlessly and insistently of justice and peace, it will rekindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice and peace.”

Someone said to me recently “this is the church’s finest hour! Our position is a powerful one. We represent the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

It is time for the silent giant to speak up.

We must be courageous and bold in our witness. The church and its members must reclaim our prophetic voice. We are called to preach in season and out of season, cry loud and spare not. Speak truth to power, advocate for policies and programs that put an end to homelessness and hunger, greater employment opportunities, better wages, skill and technical training, as well as low cost and affordable housing, health insurance and day care.

Our community is in desperate need of intervention. We must restore the health of the Black Family by providing programs that teach parents to be parents, supporting them to raise their children in godly and healthy ways so they do not end up on the street and in prisons. We need men to mentor young men, sisters to help a little sister out and provide them with the motivation to be strong in mind, body and spirit.

There needs to be greater awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We need to talk about sex from the pulpit, talk about the AIDS epidemic in our preaching, talk about it in Sunday School, in Bible Class, and deal with the stigma of it in our community.

We must address the system that arrests, convicts and houses our people in an inequitable manner and do the work in our own communities that will keep our people from getting caught up in the system.

We must be committed and faithful to our calling and to the One who calls us. Commitment will not allow us to compromise. We must confront the issues, the evils that evade our world, and rob persons of peace. We must use our personal resources to meet the needs of persons that we interface with in our communities.

Commitment to the cause of Christ will not allow us to be comfortable. We cannot sit idly by or sit in silence while others are living in such discomfort. Commitment to the cause of Christ will not allow us to be concerned and serve only when it’s convenient.

Commitment will cause us to give our all no matter what the cost. Commitment was what Jesus came to model. In his effort to reconcile persons to God, it was not just a matter of a contribution of money. He gave all he had and was.

Our message must be clear. A person's message is always heard more clearly in the context of their character. We must practice what we preach, live lives that reflect what we say we believe, treating every person that we encounter with dignity and respect. My grandfather said it this way

A charge to keep I have

A God to glorify

An ever dying soul to save

To fit it for the sky

To serve this present age

My calling to fulfill

Oh may it all my powers engage to do my master's will.