



Prez Release

First Things

Not many Prez Reports came your way during 2008. Frankly, I was swamped. I must admit that this writing effort had to take a back seat to some very pressing issues we were facing at AGTS—nothing of a crisis nature, just lots of things that needed attention all at the same time. You’ve probably experienced the same thing in your life and one of the consequences is that creative thinking gets short-changed. I haven’t learned the special skills associated with blogging. I’ve lived too long carefully choosing the words I offer for public communication to part with them casually, but as we begin 2009, I want to see if I can get the cognitive juices moving again.

Two things have jumped out at me recently that have really caused me to think. First, we will shortly see the inauguration of a new president. Predictions are that Washington D.C. will see an unprecedented number of people wanting to just be there on this historic occasion. As is my uncomfortable experience on a regular basis, I have friends whose views of our President-elect vary from cynical to enthusiastic. It makes for carefully crafted conversations depending on who I’m with.

I can only begin to approximate the sheer joy and utter pride of my African-American friends as they see what many of them never thought they’d see in their lifetimes, actually come to pass. I’m guessing many of them experienced the same thing we saw so poignantly captured for us in the tears of Oprah and Jesse Jackson on that night of celebration in Grant Park last November. I’m hoping that some of those tears dimmed the past remembrances of fire hoses, violent lunch counter sit-ins, and countless other tragedies that racial injustice calls to memory. They do understand the “audacity of hope” in ways I can’t begin to imagine.

On the other hand, I also understand the friends whose hesitancy about our near future is palpable. Their concerns over issues related to the dignity of life and how our new president will impact that crucial issue are not small items. The vitriolic responses from so many sectors to the choice of Rick Warren to pray at the inauguration are clear indicators that the culture wars cannot be finessed into some domesticated dialogue over human sexuality. The decision to add an openly gay Episcopalian bishop to pray at another inaugural related event only focuses this issue more poignantly. To be a follower of Jesus these days will certainly include being in the bulls-eye of some pretty powerful interests who, frankly, are not about to be

silenced, neutralized, or pacified. Narrow stereotypical images, reinforced by all forms of media, do not favor we who name Jesus as Lord.

Another recent event also caught my attention. It was the death of Richard John Neuhaus, the editor of the journal: *First Things*. A 60's social activist who left what he termed "the movement" after the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision, Neuhaus became a firebrand of truth. He published his most known volume in 1984 entitled, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. He later wrote that "politics is a function of culture, at the heart of culture is mortality and at the heart of morality is religion." As the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported (January 9, 2009), Neuhaus was a clear voice against the trend of eradicating religious symbols and thought from American civil life. He warned of a state that "drives out prophetic religion and establishes a monopoly on public space and public meaning."

Whether one approaches the future with cynicism or exuberance, followers of Jesus are not going to have any room for just cruising. "First things" are going to be more necessary than ever. The aggressiveness of those who view followers of Jesus as the problem to "progress" will not go into the night softly. I'm also convinced that we will need new dexterity and commitment to engage the challenges that we are going to face by carefully considering who may be allies in this stand for *first things*. Christianity, that drinks too deeply at the wells of pop culture or uncritiqued nostalgia, may end up somewhere between marginalized and neutralized. I think we are going to need all the audacious hope and first things we can muster.

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