



The National Council of Evangelicals in France

Plenary Assembly, 30 May 2017

President's Address

The strange presidential election campaign we have just seen has been illuminating. Between the resurrection of far-left utopia, the seduction of extreme right-wing neo-paganism, the moral and electoral collapse of the parties of government and the emergence of a new political offer with "La République en marche", it is easy to say that the cards were completely reshuffled and voters disoriented. But what concerns me here is less the major political developments in our country and more the surprising evangelical developments in politics. According to an IFOP poll "The vote of confessional voters in the first round of the presidential election", 26% of Protestants abstained and 16% voted for Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 30% for Emmanuel Macron, 20% for François Fillon and 20% for Marine Le Pen (33% in the second round!). One-third of the Protestant electorate has therefore chosen extremes which thrive on a discourse of rejection and hatred. Even more troubling, many evangelicals have adopted such discourses of rejection and hatred on social media. (...) Sébastien Fath, with the vigour and relevance that he is known for, condemned this kind of talk as "an off-shore holy hatred Christianity" characterized by a desire to make a noise with supposedly the purest of intentions. An attempt at vindictive pharisaic mobilization (that is for hatred) and a focus on questions of sexuality at the expense of social questions.

The reposting that this kind of remarks have on social media are such that it must wake us up. In our evangelical milieu there are deceptive speeches that caricature the faith, ridicule the Gospel, and draw many of us into vain struggles. Allow me to give you three brief reflections on this subject as a roadmap and a warning.

I. The announcement of salvation, not the defence of values

In a society that is losing its bearings, there is a confusing discourse about values. Everyone praises freedom to the skies, almost all praise secularism, and many praise equality, fraternity or, even more, life! And believers, struggling with a very secularized country, react as soon as they perceive

(or imagine) a vaguely Christian inspiration at the origin of one or other of these values. The problem is that the very notion of a value, by its imprecision, is ambiguous: so those who praise life with the greatest vigour do so in favour of ... the end of life, that is to say, of euthanasia, for, they say, life is worth only if it is worthy in their own eyes!

What too many Christians do not perceive is that this discourse on values plays the ultimate, sometimes even substitutive, role of religion - it is clear with a secular "value" - in a society which, is systematically removed from any idea of transcendence. But a value that no longer has God and His will as reference is transformed into an idol and produces a rigid morality far more enslaving than all divine commandments combined. Think of the multiplication of prohibitions produced by idolized freedom: it is forbidden to consider abortion as a bad choice, forbidden to propose a reasonable alternative to it on the internet, forbidden to speak of homosexuality as a sin, soon forbidden to spank one's child ... and above all it is forbidden to forbid!

Let us be blunt - the defence of values, even if they are Christian, is not our struggle. We have no calling to encourage idolatry, or, what is no better, hypocrisy. For, we must remember, there was not so long ago a time when Christian morality, the values of the family and of marital fidelity, permeated society. Were men and women better? No, but they were certainly more deceitful, since a large part of them were just trying to save appearances. Is this really what we want? Do we not have to declare the total inability of Man to do good and the gift of justification by the grace of God through deliverance brought by Jesus Christ? Yes, dear friends, the only battle that is worthwhile in a lost world is that of the proclamation of the Gospel, of that power of God by which it saves all those who believe.

II. Prophetic call, not political power

Would this mean that the development of society is of no interest for us and that we have no role to play in it? I do not believe this, but we should meditate on this warning from the Lord: "*I send you as sheep among the wolves. Be careful as serpents and innocent as doves.*" (Matthew 10:16) In other words, the world to which the Lord sends us is dangerous and there are plenty of snares. I see such a snare clearly emerging in evangelicalism around the world and to a lesser degree in French evangelicalism, which is the aim of gaining political power.

The motivating force behind this idea is that, in order for long term change to be effected in a country, it would be enough for a Christian to take the highest office, an idea which is "crazy" since it is naïve and has been discredited. In practice, this has never happened. Certainly there have been presidents in some sub-Saharan African countries and in the United States who have confessed to having put their faith in Jesus Christ, but none of them have transformed their nation. Worse, many have been as corrupt as their non-Christian predecessors! And when, in ancient history, Emperor Constantine converted to Christ, he certainly made Christianity an official religion of his empire, but it was not faith that triumphed over paganism, but paganism which penetrated into the Church! We should never forget this. Our struggle as a body of Christ is not to gain political power, but to keep our hands free to assume our prophetic role in society.

What I call the prophetic role of our churches can be summed up in an expression: to have the courage to speak truth by first striving to discern what is good and then daring to reveal our convictions peacefully and clearly. The complexity of the issues and situations confronting us means there is no credibility in hasty and peremptory statements or compares those who risk making them with any of so many pressure groups that defend particular interests. Our love of the Truth being on show forbids us such a shortcut and obliges us to work courageously in study and analysis.

We must, therefore, initially, within our communities, nurture a genuine biblically based reflection that goes through serious and calm debate. Everyone will thus have the opportunity to learn not to react only on the basis of prejudices forged by emotion - which is too often the case in our society - but according to specific principles, criteria defined in a more thoughtful approach, and which enables us to take on our role of citizens in a more mature way.

Then, on the basis of this common work, we must seize all the opportunities offered to us as churches, to question society about the consequences of the choices it makes. While resolutely favouring constructive participation in collective debate, it is undeniable that many of our contributions will need to condemn the tragic reality of evil and declare the judgment that is coming. The exercise is obviously perilous and will surely win us clear enemies. For if it is to be truly effective, it will imply that we know how to combine firmness, gentleness and humility.

I draw your attention to the fact that this courage of speaking the truth also serves to proclaim the Gospel insofar as it helps to remind people of the gap between what God wants for Man and the choices that Man makes.

III. Christian freedom, not the moral majority

The last part of our reflection on the role that we have in this disorganized world: to pray and act so that freedom of conscience and of worship for all is respected, not to defend the establishment of any moral majority.

Have you ever been struck by the terms used by the apostle Paul in inviting to pray for all men, for kings and for all who are in power? This is what he says exactly (1 Timothy 2: 1-2): *“I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”* The goal set by Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, of intercession for the pagan authorities of his time, is neither their conversion nor the transformation of the empire into an antechamber of Christianity. No, it is the preservation of peace and a certain form of freedom allowing believers to live as disciples of Christ.

Could this be the indication that the apostle is very little concerned with the salvation of the authorities and with the development of the manners of society? I doubt it. But what the apostle understood, under the inspiration of the Spirit, is that social transformation first passes through the regeneration of the hearts of the greatest number and not through the spectacular conversion of some, or

by the overthrow of the ungodly in power. That is why he places his call to intercession in a resolutely "evangelical" perspective: This is what is right before God, our Saviour, which he approves. For he wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

This strategy, which did not fail to intrigue the commentators on Paul's silence on slavery, proved to be effective. Although he never condemned this degrading practice, including when it concerned members of the Christian community, he changed his perspective by writing to Philemon about his slave Onesimus (Philemon 1: 15-17): *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for ever - no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me."*

The context in which we live gives us more latitude than the apostle had. We can and must intelligently use freedom of speech and action that our democratic system gives us to participate in social life. But because we do not share the values of this same society, our participation is helpfully critical. We do not demand a return to a Christian order, nor do we dream of the emergence of a moral majority; we hope more modestly to contribute to the defence of freedom of conscience and worship on the one hand and to the limitation of evil on the other hand, by our protests and our proposals.

Martin Luther King, who had some success in his fight against racial discrimination, said with realism and that we could draw inspiration from: "Morality cannot be legislated, but behaviour can be regulated. Judicial decrees may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless.... Laws cannot make my employer love me, but they can prevent them rejecting my application because of the colour of my skin."

May the Lord save us from making a mess of our struggle with this lost world! Far from the dreadful dreams of restoring Christian values, conquering power or establishing a moral majority, let us put all our energy into proclaiming the Gospel by assuming our prophetic role in society and defending freedom of conscience and worship. And let us do so without ever forgetting intercession for all men, for kings and for all who are in power.

Etienne Lhermenault

President of CNEF