



“Thermometers and Thermostats”

by James M. Decker

In my last essay, I wrote of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and his call to be extremists in service of righteousness in our communities. But late in his letter, Dr. King tackles another topic that is on my heart to cover—the weak voice of the modern Christian church.

Dr. King writes of the Christian church in 1963 in a manner eerily fitting the Christian church of 2019. He writes that early Christians rejoiced at “being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed.” He said the early church was not a “thermometer

that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion,” but instead was “a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.” He rightly noted that when early Christians arrived in a town, local leaders charged them as “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” The Christians were unwavering, convicted to obey God rather than the threats of men.

Dr. King points out that the early Christians were instrumental in ending hideous cultural traditions like infanticide and gladiator contests, while the modern church was a “weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound...an arch defender of the status quo.” He wrote that, rather than being disturbed by the church’s presence, the powerful of a community are “consoled by the church’s silent - and often even vocal - sanction of things as they are.”

Fifty-six years after Dr. King criticizes the Christian church of the 1960s, his words should cut each of us to the bone, as if they were directed at the Christian church of the 2010s. On the state and national scale,

Christian groups and leaders possess substantial influence, but how do they use that influence? Do they use their influence to be the thermostat of Dr. King’s analogy, actively changing the temperature? Or do they have a tendency to succumb to the temptations of power faced by all flawed humans, wielding their power and influence in such ways that merely serve to maintain their power and influence and the trappings that come with it?

More important to each of us reading this, what is the church doing on a local level? And by that, I mean: what are WE doing on a local level? Are we the thermometer, going with the flow of popular opinion? Or are we the thermostat, responsible for changing the temperature? Are we defending the status quo, giving silent or vocal sanction to the power structures of the community? Or are we the disturbers of the peace and the agitators, putting an end to hatred, injustice, and need within our realms?

There is an old saying that the job of a good journalist is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I believe that

to be true. I also believe that’s the job of the local church and its leaders. The afflicted are everywhere among us - dealing with financial need, depression and mental illness, domestic violence, among other things - how are we comforting them? Are we comforting them at all? Do we occasionally acknowledge the need, having a moment of inner angst, and then move on with our day? Do we even realize the need exists?

How are we afflicting the comfortable? Are those in our power structures being held accountable to improve hatred, injustice, and need in the community? Are we actively engaging our city, school, law enforcement, and other government officials, asking them to take action on matters clearly within their power? And if they do not actively work to improve their community, does our silence condone their inaction?

When people complain about the state of society, one of my great frustrations is the tendency to use “they” as the culprit. There is no “they” in our city, our state, or our nation. There is only a “we.” There is no

mysterious third-party force roaming around without our awareness. If you think our society has declined, “they” didn’t change it, “we” were party to that change by our actions or inaction. If you think your community needs improving, “they” aren’t gong to change it, “you” and “we” have to change it.

A thermometer merely records the temperature in a room. It doesn’t change it. A thermostat changes the temperature to a new desired outcome. Dr. King’s comparison of the local church to a thermometer and a thermostat was a perfect analogy in 1963 and it is a perfect analogy in 2019. If you want to be a thermostat, fine, just know that you’ll only record the temperature, not change it. If you want things to change in your community, you must take the role of a thermostat, acting as an “agitator” and “disturber of the peace” like the early church so eagerly did.

It’s time to be a thermostat.

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...Monday’s City Council meeting

(Continued from front page)

In the first action taken, council member Ricky Green made a motion to name Brandi Brosh as Mayor Pro Tem, replacing Roger Alexander. Ann Hedges provided the second and the vote carried.

Hedges then made a motion to rescind her vote from the meeting on January 29, 2019, where a motion was passed to restrict the mayor’s access to City Hall. Following discussion in which the mayor warned council members to be very careful about what they said, the motion was changed to granting the mayor access to any and all areas during regular business hours. Brosh provided a second and the motion carried.

The mayor then passed out a new policy regarding access and passwords to city officials’ computers and emails. The mayor pointed out that council makes policy, not the city secretary. Following a discussion, Brosh made a motion to put the necessary information into the city’s safety deposit box where signator’s on the city’s accounts would have access. These include the council members and the city secretary. Hedges provided a second and the motion passed.

Mayor Crenshaw then passed out a three paragraph statement to council members. Green recommended removing the third paragraph and the remaining two paragraphs are listed below and were posted to the City’s Facebook page at approximately 12:30 am Tuesday, February 5, 2019. A motion to approve this statement was made by Green, seconded by Brosh and passed.

“The City of Robert Lee is being audited for the past 2

years by an outside, independent auditor. It is a demanding process that will take at least 6 more weeks to complete & results will be made public at that time. The audits are of the City, not of any individual. No illegal activity is believed to have occurred. Council will take appropriate action any time evidence of illegal activity is found. The City of Robert Lee’s elected officials are continuing to take steps to assure responsible spending and behavior with appropriate oversight and reporting. Council will continue to implement policy to improve current practices, including a purchasing policy proposed several months ago.

Any document can be added to City Council packets. Information in the packets is not necessarily the opinion of the City, individual council members, or the Mayor. A document being provided to City Council does not prove, or even imply, it’s accuracy. At times, only a portion of a document is of interest or new information is gathered between preparing packets and the time a Council meeting takes place.”

The last motion passed was to hire a forensic auditor from Abilene. The motion was made by Brosh and seconded by Green.

The many citizens who were in the audience had numerous questions which they put to council throughout the “open” part of the meeting. It was pointed out that special city councils required a quorum of four council members to be legal and that quorum rule was in violation once Alexander and Munoz resigned. The council members were asked why they didn’t immediately adjourn when the rule was violated.

Green replied that they had started out with five members, so they were okay.

[Editor’s Note: A call was received by this office on Tuesday afternoon from the mayor stating that the Monday evening meeting became a violation of the Open Meetings Act at 6:38 pm and all actions taken after that time were null and void.]

Council members made a point to mention how they disagreed with the debit card guidelines proposal released through the public information request. Hedges denied ever seeing this document before, but was assured by other council members that it had been in her agenda packet for the January 14, 2019, meeting. The mayor pointed out that the \$10,000 figure could have been for other purchases where invoices or receipts had not yet been recorded or submitted. Many of the citizens in attendance at the meeting pressed the Sheriff for an investigation into these discrepancies.

The Observer/Enterprise learned Tuesday morning from Coke County Sheriff Wayne McCutchen that “an investigation into possible misappropriation of funds at the City of Robert Lee was opened Tuesday morning, February 5, 2019”. When the mayor was contacted for a comment, the following was submitted. “We will be providing documents and updates to the Sheriff as requested and will cooperate in any way possible to assure the community’s concerns are answered.”

The filing period ends next Friday, February 15, 2019, for four council member positions – Roger Alexander, Janie Munoz, Ricky Green and Ann Hedges. Applications for a place on the

ballot are available at Robert Lee City Hall during normal business hours.

...Letter to the Editor

(Continued from front page)

However she did not repay the City until after the Auditor advised her of the problem. Then it was about two weeks after she was notified that she repaid the City for her electric bill.

2. On October 20, 2018, a purchase was made of voice recognition software, microphone, and a scanner from Best Buy for \$676.93. As far as staff knows this is not being used at City Hall. This was never discussed or approved by Council.

3. On June 21, 2018, a smartwatch and accessories was purchased from Amazon.com for \$735.95. The Mayor states that she returned it within 30 days and the credit should be on the Bank Statement. The credits that were found on the Bank Statement are \$71.34 on July 5, \$196.00 on July 18, and \$75.72 on July 19. We do not have receipts for these so we do not know if they are related to the smart watch purchase or not. This was never discussed or approved by City Council.

Due to City Staff being aware on these irregularities, tensions have arisen between the Mayor and City Staff.

Prior to the Council Meeting of January 14, 2019, the Mayor met with the City Attorney Jeff Betty and Mayor Pro Tem Roger Alexander. The City Attorney advised the Mayor that she should turn in all City equipment and only be at City Hall during normal business hours until the debit card problems could be investigated. The Mayor agreed to this arrangement.

Attorney Betty informed City

Secretary, Crystal Blevins, of this agreement. This agreement was reached to reduce tensions between the Mayor and City Staff while an audit of debit card use can be performed. The Mayor returned City equipment and honored the agreement for about 10 days. She has recently picked up a key to City Hall (which she surrendered earlier) and dishonored her agreement by being at City Hall after hours. This is the reason that at the called meeting on January 29, 2019, City Council took the extraordinary action of passing a motion to have the Mayor NOT be at City Hall, except in the front lobby during normal business hours.

Unfortunately, it appears, the Mayor has continued to try to control the affairs of the City and not rely upon the two capable individuals, hired by the City Council, to perform city functions. It appears that her ability to control excessive and frivolous spending is in question.

...Summer Nutrition Programs

(Continued from previous page)

All new sponsors are required to take training courses before participating in SFSP. Some applications may require additional review, and sponsors are encouraged to visit www.summerfood.org to determine if their organization falls into this category. The SFSP application deadline for new sponsors and those requiring more thorough review is April 15, 2019. All other returning SFSP sponsors must apply by May 1, 2019. The deadline for all SSO applications is May 31, 2019.

For more information about TDA’s Summer Nutrition Programs, visit www.summerfood.org.