



# AT THE THRESHOLD

The Church today is a rapidly declining institution, by any standard of measurement. **The opportunity has to be seized;** the church has to move beyond problems and barriers that are presently confounding it, much of which is supported by a conservative tendency that is protective of its past rather than its core tradition.

Each of its branches is particularly protective of the past on which its tradition was founded. The Protestant Churches are protective of the issues that drove the Protestant Reformation, but those issues have been played out. The Roman Catholic Church is protective of the medieval church, but those rich cisterns of faith are dry. The Eastern Orthodox Churches are fixed on the church of the fourth century when early church conflicts and concerns were resolved in the process of becoming the established church of the Roman Empire.

It is **the early church of the first three centuries** that is proving to be the legitimately patristic foundation to which the church must look and, more to the point, **the church cannot become rigidly set in the mode of any single era**, even that of the patristic church.

As the world moves into a new era, **the church must adapt**, just as it adjusted during the massive upheaval that formed the medieval era out of antiquity, and in the radical growth out of these middle ages into the renaissance. As **the church rediscovers its origins** through steadily increasing knowledge and insight about the early church, it is apparent that the internal demand for reform cannot be satisfied except by change so radical and pervasive that again it will qualify as a major reformation. **We need a reformation and the reformation must be ecumenical; it demands a united church.**

The task of this reformation is:

- to shape the future church rather than to leave it to circumstances and eventualities
- to influence society in this renewed and global time of formation; to shape its future in accord with the vision of the church for humanity.

**It is a time of opportunity; it is a time of danger.**

At the Threshold is called into existence to help shape the ecumenical church that is coming into formation by fostering the reformation in which we find ourselves. The time has come for leadership to be provided:

- by the grassroots membership who are urging progressive reform from within the different groupings of the pan-communal church
- by communities dedicated to reform, theological dialogue, and a life of worship.

We shall do so, not through official institutions and organizations, but by **inter-net-working, offering spiritual support, and providing services** to one another. We will suggest a vision of the reformed and united church for which God's people yearn, and **call the church to its future** by acting on that vision now.

**Visit our website at [atthethreshold.org](http://atthethreshold.org) and subscribe.**





# AT THE THRESHOLD

## A Commentary on the Trayvon Martin Case

### The Power and Purpose of the Law

By Joe Morris Doss

I recently found myself addressing a room full of judges, speaking to them about the death penalty. I began by asking them the fundamental question: What is the purpose of the law? They talked about protection of the public, establishing rules of behavior, protecting the fabric of society, and serving justice – but floundered in disagreement over the attempt to define “justice.” I was not surprised that they never mentioned the term “moral,” or any thing like that.

Then I asked the judges what makes the law effective, where lies its power, what makes it work for its purposes. They talked about sanctions and punishment and deterrence, yet they never talked about the simple but overwhelming power of standing for something – of having symbolic power in standing for what is important and for what is unacceptable behavior in a given society.

#### Premise #1: The Purpose of the Law

*The purpose of the law is to create, establish, and maintain a moral order of society, and where violated to restore it.*

A democratic society is constantly working to discover and fashion the order of society it considers moral. For example, the desire to balance minority rights with majority will is a relentless struggle. Those adhering to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions seek an order reflective of the compassion, righteousness, and justice of God. Christians specifically seek an order that reflects the mind of Christ and is most transparent to the kingdom of God.

#### Premise #2: The Power of the Law

*The power of the law is in its symbolic clout. It points to what is considered moral: to the unity and orderliness of society, to what is truly important to society, to the degree to which certain behavior will not be tolerated in society, and to its power to curse.*

For example, in criminal law the sanctions to be imposed for violation of different laws indicate the extent to which an offender will be judged by society. A fine tells potential offenders that they should obey a particular law, but a felony conviction imposes a significant curse on the moral behavior of the offender, and makes her or him an outcast. The law does not work as effectively as a deterrent – not nearly so – in reliance on punishment. A better deterrent is the threat that an offender will genuinely experience the curse or censure of one’s peers, family, friends, circle of society.

The ultimate power of the law is in its ability to restore the moral order after it has been violated; the most effective restoration is reconciliation – reconciliation of the offender to the offended and to society as a body.

#### Premise #3: The necessity for justice in the execution of the law

*The law must be just and it must be exercised with justice. If so, the citizens are far more likely to respect, cooperate and obey the authorities and the law itself.*

If the order of society is sufficiently moral, and justice is applied with equality and fairness for all citizens, the vast majority

will be motivated to cooperate with one another and act within the established bounds of law. When the law is applied unequally, with prejudice or malice or insufficient regard for classes, communities, and categories of the citizenry – such as may be defined by race, poverty, or sexuality – the law will not operate effectively within them. In such communities or segments of society, offenders are far less likely to experience the curse of their peers or feel like an outcast when convicted of a crime.

#### **Premise #4: The power of the law to shape the human hearts of society**

*To the extent that law reflects an order of society that (1) is genuinely perceived as moral and (2) is applied equally and with fairness for all citizens, it is a remarkably powerful tool for challenging and reshaping the opinions, the philosophies, and even the hearts of citizens. This will be true, however gradually, even for those whose already formed opinions oppose particular laws and are most fiercely resisted. These can even be prejudices and obsessions over which citizens may be ready to take the law into their own hands or even fight.*

There will always be citizens – individuals, communities, and entire regions – who adamantly disagree with certain tenants of the law. The disagreement will be more problematic if the law challenges the most dearly held beliefs, myths, and moral assumptions that have grown up through the years to become a matter of custom for these citizens, communities, and regions – for custom is largely the foundation of law.

Until the law speaks, and where the law speaks with an immoral or unequally applied effect, citizens feel free and justified to believe what they will.

But, when the law becomes clearly and unequivocally established as justice, that is, if indeed it is the equally applied law of a society that is considered moral, the majority of citizens in a genuinely democratic society who have disagreed with it, however vehemently, will inevitably adjust personal and community beliefs to conform – even overcoming deeply held prejudices with which individuals will have to live. People will not adjust to the law until it is unquestionably established, until it is the law of the land.

We know this as a matter of fact from the recent history of the civil rights movement, a movement that many of us experienced most directly and dramatically in our youth and recall not as some “his-story” but as “our-story.” Still ringing in our ears is a claim that was constantly issued: Belief, and even prejudice, cannot be changed by law; “legalities” simply represent changes on paper instead of what people feel and believe in the heart and thus are irrelevant and ineffective. It was admitted that the law could be imposed but no more than that.

All of this was proved wrong – that old shiboloth has been buried. The proof is in the “Southern” pudding. The very conservative Supreme Court recently made the decision that the South had so changed that there is no longer special concern over its application of voting rights. Even if this is naïve and sticky, no one is going to argue that racism is right – not in the way it was publicly argued during the Jim Crow era through the civil rights movement. There are other examples throughout history, grand and insignificant, but it has been established that the law exercises a decisive influence on society’s moral positions, especially its sense of what is to be applied equally and fairly.

#### **Premise #5: The power of the law to teach immorality**

*Insights concerning the purpose and power of the law have an underside that has to be recognized and guarded against vigilantly: Immoral law teaches immorality. As one of the most important guardians of what is moral and of what will make the order of society genuinely moral, of what will best conform society to the mind of Christ, the church has to be vigilant against acquiescence to that which is immoral and most especially when it is established in law. The church did this to some degree in the civil rights movement and must do it again.*

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These premises bring us to the most important lesson to be learned from the tragedy of Trayvon Martin's death and the successful defense of his killer. The villain that emerged from the trial is the law itself.

Our fundamental and most important question does not regard the jury or the verdict or even the actions of a man who understood and acted according to the law as he saw it.

We question the morality of a society that has the kind of gun-possession and use-of-deadly-weapon laws that have recently been passed. We question the morality of laws that are not applied equally and fairly. We question the morality of laws that are designed to target certain segments of society on the basis of race and poverty. The concrete and actual effect is now fully exposed. That effect is to be cursed and condemned by the church. Those laws are shaping our society, making it an immoral society.

### **The church must unite and pronounce its curse now!**

*Joe Morris Doss, founder and president of "At the Threshold," has served parishes in Louisiana and California as an Episcopal priest, and the Diocese of New Jersey as Bishop. Bishop Doss has long been involved in civil rights activism, including the integration of LSU while he was student body president. He was the founding president of Death Penalty Focus, the founding chair of the National Center for AIDS in San Francisco, and together with Bishop Leo Frade of Southeast Florida, the organizer of a famous rescue mission that freed thousands of pardoned political prisoners from Cuba. Bishop Doss is the author of several books including "Songs of the Mothers" and "Let the Bastards Go". With his son Andrew Doss, he co-wrote the drama "Earnest", about the transformation of a death row inmate.*



## AT THE THRESHOLD

As the church explodes with growth in the Global South, it implodes in the United States and Europe. We see increasingly desperate attempts to save the institution. But what if the challenge is a good thing, what if the necessity of change presents an opportunity to live more deeply into the story of God's love and justice? At the Threshold welcomes the change we're experiencing, trusting that it's leading us into a new way of being church.

We're thirty or forty years into what church history shows to be a decades long process. As we look toward the next decades of change, we're promoting a church that is:

- ▶ becoming **genuinely global**, **restoring justice and peace** to the center of our mission, **empowering the laity**,
- ▶ finding new ways of **telling the Christian story**, **reflecting on what God is doing in the world**, and worshiping in communities that **capture the imagination of twenty-first century people**.

### The Power of the Network

Tapping into the energy of emerging networks we will:

- ▶ Create a platform and infrastructure to **build and share knowledge**
- ▶ **Weave relationships**
- ▶ Access **new perspectives**
- ▶ Spread **grassroots innovation**



### An Institutional Church in Turmoil

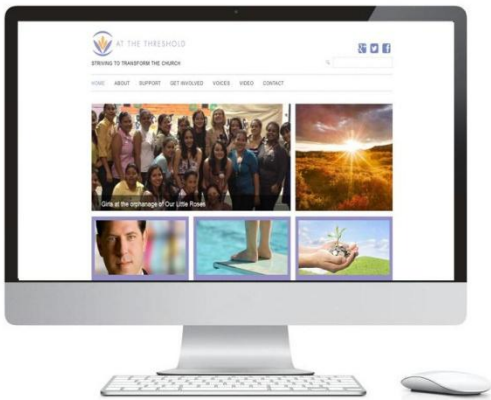
- ▶ More than 1 in 4 Americans belonged to a mainline denomination in the 1960s. **Now it's less than 1 in 7.**
- ▶ Young adults are leaving the church at a rate 5 or 6 times the historical norm. **1 in 3** identify themselves as having **no religious affiliation**.
- ▶ Between 1973 and 2008, the percentage of people with **"great confidence" in religious leaders** declined from 35% to **less than 25%**
- ▶ **1 in 10** Americans identify themselves as ex Roman Catholics
- ▶ Since 2000 the number of **churches reporting excellent financial health** has plummeted from 31% to **14%**. The trend began before the recession.
- ▶ **Rise of the Global Church:** By the end of 2050, 4 or 5 in 6 Christians will be from the Global South

## 2013-2014 Outcomes

- ▶ Build **critical mass** in the network—4,000 users
- ▶ **Expand** the experimental worship communities into two more cities
- ▶ Support a drive for **significant policy change**
- ▶ Build **alliances with reform groups** across the denominations
- ▶ Increase by 12 the number of **church thinkers and futurists involved in the conversation**



*St. Lydia's Dinner Church in Brooklyn, NY*



## What We'll Do

- ▶ Build a Website forum for **theological reflection** (or reflection on what God's doing in the world)
- ▶ **Develop voices** who can speak to the future of the church
- ▶ Support **experimental worship** communities
- ▶ Advocate for the church to **live into the highest ideals of justice**

## Leadership

Founding President Joe Morris Doss has gathered a team with strategic planning, organizing, management, journalism, and digital media experience.

Doss has also convened a group of church thinkers and futurists, including Marcus Borg, Thomas Cahill, Alberto Cutie, Martin Marty, and Nicco Mele.

For more information, please visit [atthethreshold.org](http://atthethreshold.org).

