

Why I Don't Preach *Partisan* Politics

Matthew 4:8-11; John 17:14-19

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Introduction

1. I have borrowed this message's title from an article by Jim Baucom, senior pastor at Columbia Church, Falls Church, VA. However, I alone am responsible for the content. Baucom's church is "within the beltway," meaning he has many members who serve in government, including many politicians from both sides of the aisle. He ministers to all and is sometimes pressed to speak to one side or the other, thus the title of his article.
2. The church is first and foremost a worshipping community (Hunter 161). We are about changing lives by our witness and love. But we can never get away from politics unless we become totally isolated from the world and irrelevant to its needs.
3. I know just about anything I say on this subject may open me to attack. What disturbs me most is the demonizing of others from both sides of the political spectrum. Rhetoric that sounds evil is evil. Why can't we rejoice in our core beliefs and values (freedom for all, government of the people and for the people, peace and good for all) and allow others different political views on how to achieve our core values?
4. Tim Keller, a Presbyterian pastor in New York City, points out on Twitter the reason we as disciples of Jesus struggle in these matters – he says, the Bible binds my conscience to care for the poor, but it does not tell me "how"; the Bible says murder of the unborn is a sin and evil, but it doesn't tell me the best policies to deal with this evil; the Bible gives no word on issues of immigration except to love others. Any pastor who avoids anything politicians talk about will be found irrelevant to anyone listening.

So, why don't I preach on *partisan* politics? The key word is "partisan." To gain an answer we need to look at several passages.

1. Let's look first at Matthew 4:8-11
 - The devil took Jesus up to a high mountain and showed him "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (8).
 - He said, "I will give you all these, if you fall down and worship me" (9). It was in the devil's power to give Jesus the kingdoms of the world. The evil one is not God, but he possesses tremendous power in working against God, including the world system in all its

permutations. It is still in his power (at least for a while longer). I believe partisan politics is one of Satan's most powerful instruments to conform the church to the world.

- Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). We are told, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33).
- Jesus responded to the devil's temptation with Deuteronomy 6:13, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (Matt 4:10).
- When we put on the cosmetics of any part of the world's system, we lose our moral influence and its freedom to speak truth to that system. Avoid losing God's perspective that calls us to loyalty to him alone. Anything that dilutes our priority to him ("seek first") is wrong from a biblical perspective. You'll be giving your allegiance to the evil one.
- I don't speak on partisan politics because I think it is a tool of the evil one and part of his world system for evil.

2. Second, look at John 17:14-19.

- In Jesus' prayer, he says that he has given us the "word," i.e., the word of truth (17:18; and he is truth), and the world (the *kosmos*) has hated them because they (believers) are not of the world even as Jesus was not of the world (17:14).
- The word *kosmos* is not referring to the universe, but by definition in context it refers to the "social order of the world," the very stuff of partisan politics, people who have an agenda in conformity with its own social goals. In Christ we are not a part of this *kosmos*.
- However, Jesus goes on to ask the Father not to take us out of the world (15). What he asks is that the Father protect believers from "the evil one." Again, his view is that the world system and the evil one is connected. The evil one tries his best to entrap us in this system.
- We are *in* the world, but we are not part *of* the world. Jesus faced hatred and anger over the fact that he would not play the world's game. We are shaped by the word, not the world. We will be hated not for our political affiliation but for our association with Jesus.
- Pastor Baucom says people who ask him to speak from a partisan perspective are really saying, "please baptize my partisan views and make them sacred." If we preach the infallible word, which is sacred, it will offend all of us at some point, for we all fall short of God's

standard. That is what we preach. Partisan postures are not truth and we should not conform to them. “Do not be conformed to this world (lit. to this age), but be transformed by the renewal of your mind . . .” (Rom 12:2). This leads to another point.

3. Third, Jesus goes on to say he is sending us into the world (John 17:18). Or we might say, back into the world.

- In the same way that the Father sent the Son, so, he is sending those who believe into enemy territory where we will be hated.
- Think about it this way – our “citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20), but we’ve been sent as Christ’s “ambassadors” into the world to bring reconciliation with God (2 Cor 5:20) by pointing to the Kingdom of God where eating and drinking is not the point but “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17, 19), all things we pray for and hope for in our politics, but find only possible in the Kingdom of God.
- So, in fact, every church is an “embassy” for the Kingdom of God. We are a little part of the Kingdom in a foreign land. We have a different agenda than the rest of the world.
- Jesus never got mixed up in the world’s partisan politics. Peter and Paul never took that route. They were impacted by it all, but they came from a different viewpoint, God the Father’s agenda.
- Our agenda is to be “transformed” and to bring others along with us so that we bring about what is “good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). Consequently, we are to pray for those in authority so that we lead peaceful and quiet lives (1 Tim 2:1-2). In fact, we are to “be subject” to governing authorities for they have their authority ultimately from God according to Romans 13:1-7. The verb “be subject” is sometimes translated “obey,” but it is a passive and indicates what kind of attitude we should have toward the authorities. The same verb indicates our “proper attitude” to leaders of the church (1 Cor 16:16), to civil authorities (Tit 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13f), to God (James 4:7), to husbands by Christian wives (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1, 5), and to masters (employers) by slaves (employees) (1 Pet 2:18). C. Cranfield concludes that “be subject” therefore means respecting those in authority and doing so in a responsible manner (662-663).
- We follow God’s agenda which is counter to the world’s agenda.

Concluding reflections

Does that mean I advocate no political involvement or participation, even if only to vote? No. In fact, I wish more evangelicals would involve themselves in the needs of the world and politics may address the needs. But I want each believer to remember whom we serve and what his agenda for us is.

I think the Bible has much to say about many issues that we need to hear and respond to, issues where we listen to biblical truth rather than partisan politics, issues like racism, poverty, the sanctity of human life, the environment, hospitality to strangers, and even civility. And many more. I'm tired of questions not being answered in recent debates and civility being completely ignored. I'm tired of a well-known pastor saying that real Christians can only vote for Trump or another famous Southern Baptist pastor saying a vote for Biden is a vote for the devil.

Let me share a more upbeat story about Bill Bright and Jim Wallis and the animosity they harbored for many years.

Bill Bright founded a ministry to university students at UCLA in 1951 with the goal to reach the whole world with the gospel. He wrote the Four Spiritual Laws as a tool to share the good news in 1953 and grew CRU (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ) to worldwide proportions with many varied ministries, including the Jesus film. Bright died in 2003.

Jim Wallis is best known for his journal, *Sojourners*, and a wide variety of ministries it has spawned where he brings the good news to the poor and oppressed and helps other ministries impact the poor in their context. His ministry grows out of Washington, DC, as a hub to influence the US powers on behalf of the poor.

When Wallis was starting his journal, he uncovered a group of Christian leaders that were using their monies and power to influence political goals under the guise of a "prayer movement." Bill Bright was one of those leaders. Although Wallis believed in prayer, this prayer movement was a poorly veiled attempt to circumvent political process rather than reaching the world for Christ. Heated exchanges bounced around the press and Bright held animosity toward Wallis for years.

Twenty years later, at a conference in which both Bright and Wallis were participants, Wallis asked Bright for a conversation. Bright accepted, saying it was long overdue and yes, they needed to talk. They each asked the other for forgiveness for any ill feelings toward the other. The reconciliation brought Bright from the evangelical right and Wallis from the evangelical left back together. A great reconciliation in the body of Christ.

A short time later, one of Wallis' staff members came in and reported that Bill Bright had died at his home in Orlando. It was a sad day, Wallis reported. In the mail the next day Wallis received a letter from Bright. He figured it must have been one of the last letters he sent before his death. When he opened it, he discovered a \$1000 check and a brief note from Bill. The note read – I wish this check had 3 more zeroes after it. My ministry has always emphasized sharing the gospel while yours has been about ministering to the disenfranchised, both different sides of the same coin, the good news of Jesus Christ. I wish to balance myself out more. May this seed money be a blessing to your work. Bill

May our priority focus on the Lord and his kingdom even as we live in a partisan world.