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THE BULLY PULPIT

Is there a place for political discourse in the local church?

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Colossians 3:1-4 If then you have been raised with Christ, **seek the things that are above**, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² **Set your minds on things that are above**, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, **do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus**, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:23-24 Whatever you do, **work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men**, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

The Westminster Catechism:

Question 1: What is the chief and highest end of man?

Answer 1: **Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God**, and fully to enjoy him forever.

1 Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, **do all to the glory of God**.

Can we preach political positions/topics *boldly in the Name of the Lord, Jesus Christ* as Paul has been described in Acts 9:27-28? Would political preaching *seek the things that are above*? Can we preach politics *in the name of the Lord Jesus*? Can we preach politics *as for the Lord and not for men*? Does preaching politics *glorify God*?

Is it wrong to preach about *things that are on earth*? Are politics outside the purview of the *the name of the Lord Jesus*? Is addressing politics *working heartily ... as for men*? Who is glorified if we preach politics?

Where and how do politics and the Gospel intersect?

Albert Mohler at the 2018 *Banner of Truth* Conference indicated that moving from the pulpit ministry to political office is to degrade oneself as a pastor/preacher. Although the topic of this paper is not to address moving from the pulpit to politics, the basic premise of Dr. Mohler's position helps us to focus on the reality that political discourse and pulpit ministry are not to be confused nor heavily intermingled. Yet, politics are clearly addressed in Scripture and if we are to proclaim the whole counsel of God, we must address politics and political topics.

As we develop this discussion we will see that politics is a pervasive reality in all of our human existence. We do encounter a point of apparent conflict in being Kingdom people. We belong to the Kingdom of God, yet we live in the kingdom of earth. Preaching first and foremost proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ. He is the central figure of all things. He is the central focus of history. As we consider the meta narrative of all things, we realize that the eternal existence of the creator, sustainer, redeemer and consummator of all things must be first and foremost the pulpit exaltation. As He is given His preeminence, He also must be the one who we reflect on this earth until His return. Politics is a Christ-reflecting discipline, despite the horrible distortions that have occurred throughout history.

Politics

Politics is commonly defined as the science of civil government. It involves the administration of internal and external affairs of the state. It includes all civil power structures. The etymology of the word is based in *polis* which refers to the city or the community. Of the many institutional spheres in which man functions we cannot negate that God has established the community and thus the need for orderly administration which demands that a structure would include the authority to oversee such structures.

Romans 13:1-7 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God

has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

¹ Peter 2:13-17 Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Pulpit Ministry

The pulpit ministry is at the foundation of today's topic. We are asking if the pulpit is the place to address political issues. Yet, the pulpit ministry is not the only area of concern. Can we also, during true Christian fellowship, engage in political discourse and still be Christocentric? If it is a pulpit issue, it is a people issue. We as Christians, and especially we as proclaimers of the Word of God must be addressing the political issues of the day from a biblical perspective, because God Himself from the Scripture itself speaks to the current issues of today and the issues culture has faced throughout the generations.

We are told to preach the Word:

¹ Timothy 4:1-5 I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ²preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

The Intersection of Pulpit and Politics

Oftentimes it is difficult to delineate where politics becomes 'worldly' and 'self-serving' versus where it truly is sound teaching.

After the Constitutional convention of 1787, it is said that someone asked Benjamin Franklin of the type of established government granted by the convention. He is noted as replying, "A Republic, if you can keep it." He further stated, "When the people find that they can vote themselves money, that will herald the end of the republic." He was warning against the potential tyranny of true democracy.

Our human flesh becomes quite pragmatic. 'Whatever works for me' tends to be our flesh motive. Politics tends to lead to this attitude exaggerating itself to the point where we are willing to make the Gospel declare 'whatever works for me.' Often eisegesis overwhelms exegesis in these circumstances. This is a vital warning to not only our pulpit ministry but also to our general social discourse within the Body and outside the body. It gives us true concern and motive for a question such as this paper attempts to address.

Government

There are two spheres of government addressed in Scripture. There is the government of the Church and the government of the state.

Politics in the Church

Up until the Protestant Reformation, the primary Church government was the Roman Catholic Church. Sadly it had become corrupt and distorted as a consequence of human sin. Power corrupts. Secular writer David Brin says, *"It is said that power corrupts, but actually it's more true that power attracts the corruptible. The sane are usually attracted by other things than power."* Also, as our founding father John Adams states, *"Because power corrupts, society's demands for moral authority and character increase as the importance of the position increases."*

Men found that religion can often be a source of power, and intermingling the Church with the civil government can lead to magnified corruption.

The protestant movement against the "Church" came in light of the apostate corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. To ask our main question in this context, we could inquire, "Are we called to tolerate Roman Catholic apostasy and submit to her authority?"

Hebrews 13:7-17 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Was the protestant reformation a godly response? Was it a political movement? Was there political discourse happening in the protestant reformation?

We could be asking if God would be able to work through submissive obedience to the Roman Catholic Church, or was the rebellion of Luther and others a 'godly' rebellion? Can there be a 'godly' rebellion? We are all blessed as a consequence of the Reformation, but was the Reformation resistance to an established authority of God? If not, when did this authority leave God's sovereignty?

This is a concept one could only hope to continue to develop and resolve in regard to political discourse and Biblical Theology. As Christians, we face the reality that God has established authority in the Church and in the State. Yet, sinful humans are involved in both of these 'institutions'. As a result these spheres face adulteration. Apart from beginning with 'political' discourse, how do we move ahead for the glory of God in both the Church and the State?

Politics in the State

Just as we have seen that politics influences the Church, we also see that the government of the State becomes distorted by politics. Yet, can a Christian be a political influence for good in civil government, just as the Protestant Reformation brought glory to Christ in the Church?

Just as the Church suffered from apostasy so does civil government. The Reformers acted in civil disobedience to the Church. These rebels utilized the pulpit and other proclamatory methods to turn the Body back in the right direction and awaken the world to the truth of God. As we consider the impact of the Reformation on the Church, we must also consider the impact of civil cooperation, civil unrest, and civil disobedience in the State.

Throughout history, Christian civil rebels have existed. Peter and John in Acts 4 rebelled against the political religious system of the day declaring, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

Wycliffe, Huss, Zwingli, Cranmer, Tyndale, and Knox all rebelled. One could say they were rebelling against the corrupt Church, but the Church and State were still not clearly defined as separate entities at the time. In more modern days William Wilberforce ‘worked the system’ against the State to bring a beginning to the end of slavery. He acted on the Biblical principle that all men are created in the image of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as an agent of the Church, rebelled against the State and participated in a plot to murder Adolf Hitler in the face of the challenging Scriptures,

Proverbs 21:1-3. The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will. ² Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart. ³ To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.

Also,

Daniel 2:21 ...[God] removes kings and sets up kings ...

We ought return to these passages later, but suffice it to say that it was the Gospel that motivated these Christians to address civil government issues publicly and ecclesiologically. It is not just this passage that ought to convict our anti-Nazi dissident, but the fact that as Romans 3 says, he was rebelling against an authority instituted by God. Can we be consistent in declaring that ‘Hitler’s reign was instituted by God and his heart was in the hand of the Lord’? If that is the matter, was Bonhoeffer justified in rebelling to such an extreme to commit murder in his heart?

Earlier in history, we could consider the leaders of the American Revolution. The Declaration of Independence addressed usurpations of King George III. Many of these ‘patriots’ were professing protestants, and were declaring that it was God who motivated them to rebel against the King of England. In his work, “Common Sense,” Thomas Paine and a Quaker clergyman debated whether to submit to or to resist the King. Paine was expressing the need to rebel, while the the Quaker was demanding we honor the King.

The actions of rebellion against sovereign leaders were absolutely an extreme in the mystery of civil government and God. Even today we have rebellious political actors in our world. Ought the pulpit remain silent, or should the pulpit act, speak-out, declare and proclaim truth for the glory of God and as a testimony of His goodness? The church cannot sit back and watch the decline and degradation of society and culture, while God’s people continue without a Biblical Gospel response. We must define the response that clearly would include political discourse within the Body of Christ, and from the pulpits of Biblical Churches.

Citizenship

Where is our citizenship? Are we citizens of Heaven or citizens of earth? I posit that we are citizens of Heaven and ambassadors to earth. As ambassadors, the Lord Himself directed us to pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.” (Matthew 6:10) The will of God on earth as in heaven has numerous and broad implications. For today’s subject we must consider that civil government is instituted by God to reflect His nature and His glory. The will of God, here on earth, is that He is glorified. The order, structure and practice of civil government can and ought glorify God by reflecting the nature and being of the Trinity. Civil government is a grace that we as ambassadors are called to utilize for His glory.

Political Philosophy and the Nature of God

Just as marriage is a reflection of the nature of God, so is the state a reflection of the nature of God. The institution of marriage defines the relationship of Christ and the Church. He is our loving sacrificial head. The institution of the state also reflects the nature of God and His general grace toward all mankind. Humanity has distorted the nature of marriage, corrupting our view of the relationship of Christ and the Church. Nonetheless, when one considers God's design for marriage, it is a reflection of God's design for the Church.

There are several characteristics of civil government that even secular political philosophers would propose. The most foundational of these are also clearly expressed in God's design for the State as it reflects God's nature. Among the many attributes of God that civil government reflects are order, authority, protection, blessing, and justice.

1 Corinthians 13:33a, 40 For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.
...⁴⁰ But all things should be done decently and in order.

Matthew 28:18 All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Psalms 91:14 Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name.

Ephesians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

Romans 3:26; 5:9 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ... Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

A godly government will accurately display the characteristics of the God who created it. As always, the image is marred by the sin of humanity. Just as we must fight for marriage to reflect its original design, we must fight for civil government to reflect the original design as clearly expressed in Scripture. Therefore, if we preach on the Biblical design for marriage, we must also preach on the Biblical design for the State. Just as we preach against the distortions of marriage, we must also preach against the distortions of civil government. The one who is both just and justifier is expressed in the Gospel of grace and mercy through a just government.

Moreover, we must consider the variety of spheres and disciplines that are either subject to or intertwined with politics. We come to accept the fact that one cannot address one discipline without stepping upon another discipline. Consider this variety of topics and attempt to separate a line between one and another: Philosophy, Ethics, Biology, Psychology, Sociology, Law, Politics, Economics, History. We are unable to distinctly establish a line of separation between any of these topics. Then consider Theology. God speaks to all of these topics throughout Scripture for His glory and as an expression of Gospel grace.

Politics addresses each of these topics in a variety of circumstances. Obviously law and economics are the two most prevalent political concerns in western culture today. But we cannot deny that each of the other disciplines must be considered in the development of state and national legislation and policy. As we address these disciplines and we are confronted by them in passages of Scripture, it becomes impossible to ignore the political ramifications on the people in the pews and the greater community.

Addressing Political Issues

I hope that, by this point I have established that civil government is instituted by God. Next that civil government becomes distorted by man. Thirdly, that civil government is a broad but clear reflection of the nature of God. Additionally, as a reflection of the nature of God, the Church, and thus the pulpit, has a responsibility to declare the redeeming glory of God in the Gospel as it relates to civil government today. Pulpits must be utilized to declare both the blessings of godly government and rebuke distortions and perversions of government. That is,

not only is there a place for political discourse in the Church, but a necessity for political discourse in the Church and from the pulpit.

I am absolutely not declaring that the pulpit ought regularly and/or habitually address political issues. Politics is not in any way primary to the Church or the pulpit ministry, but I do declare that there are times and seasons where one cannot resist making political declarations from the Word of God directly or indirectly from the pulpit.

On the other hand, our question from the start was “Is there a place for political discourse in the local church?” I now want to change the direction for the remainder of this paper to, “What is the place of political discourse in the local church?”

Taxation

Let's begin with a seemingly mundane political topic such as taxation. In regard to taxation, Jesus told us to “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” (Mark 12:17, see also Romans 13:7) We could immediately conclude that taxation is completely political, and paying taxes is just something we do because we are called to do it. A view we could apply is that we have no choice but to pay taxes and that taxation is not a Gospel topic.

Yet I would guess that even the majority of churches represented in this Reformation Society have been legally incorporated as tax exempt organizations. This means that we have already taken a political position on taxation. We believe that donations to our churches should not be taxed by the various federal, state, and local entities. We might even jump through the various hoops to get all taxes removed from our utility bills when we contract for the many services. And, when we use our tax exempt status as we make purchases, we are saying we will not pay sales tax to certain political entities. We are choosing to not render unto Caesar. We are making a political statement. This appears to be a clear Gospel statement as well. We are declaring that Gospel work should not be taxed. Even in a mundane political topic as taxation, we are declaring that there is a place for political discourse in the local church, possibly even rejecting Jesus' teaching on the subject.

A variety of topics:

Let us momentarily consider a litany of political topics for the church:

- Life (beginning, middle and end)
- Economic Regulation and Classism
- Immigration
- Healthcare Finance
- Public Health (water, air quality, vaccinations, HIV, CDC)
- Criminal Justice
- Human Trafficking
- Climate Change
- Marriage, Family, Human Sexuality and Gender Equality
- Ethnic Equality (not race!)
- Public Education
- Firearms and Public Safety
- Military Power
- Religious Freedoms
- Business Regulation
- Employment Regulation
- International Relations

As we peruse this list, every one of us has a point of view. Our challenge is how to address a Biblical point of view on these issues that we face on a daily basis. End of life issues, for example, fall under a variety of disciplines: ethics, politics, biology, law, sociology, etc.

I was recently faced, as a pastor, a very weighty situation. A man who was conscious of his circumstances, was medically compromised and required both a feeding tube and respirator. He had a DNR and his wife was always by his side. The assistive technologies would keep him alive long-term, yet he was fully dependent on them and bed-ridden. His heart was weakened. When fed normally he would suffer severe reflux resulting in aspiration and consequential pneumonia. As a result, the respirator and feeding tube would be re-inserted. He desired the feeding tube and the respirator removed as soon as he was breathing on his own. Yet each time this cycle happened, his pneumonia would progress and his heart would grow weaker.

His wife had to decide if she would continue this downward spiral which prolonged an ever-declining quality of life, or allow him to die with dignity by removing the respirator and feeding tube, and no longer provide nutrition. Eventually, her husband would starve to death. She sought my advice.

To address another topic, I met a young man from a central American nation that was known for its corruption. There were no simple and affordable means for him to obtain proper travel and immigration documents to come to the U.S. When he was 16 years of age, his family paid ‘coyotes’ to illegally deliver him to the U.S. Upon arrival, he was waiting for a bus when the INS arrived. Many of the other illegal immigrants accompanying him scattered. The event happened in a mountainous area where there was snow on the ground. His feet were numb because he had inadequate attire. He could not run. He was captured and placed in the system. An individual near our church travelled to bring him to live with her. The young man had attended a Baptist Church with his mother in his home country, so he began to attend services at our church. He got an education, learned english, kept his INS hearings and found proper employment. Over time, his case was eventually rejected and he went on the lamb. He and I would frequently discuss that he was in the U.S. illegally and I would not report him to authorities, but that I would help him in his walk with Christ. He still returns to the area and visits me. We discuss the need to honor the laws of the U.S. as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Biblical Response to Political Issues

Micah 6:6-13 “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

⁸He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

⁹The voice of the Lord cries to the city— and it is sound wisdom to fear your name: “Hear of the rod and of him who appointed it! ¹⁰Can I forget any longer the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is accursed? ¹¹Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales and with a bag of deceitful weights?

¹²Your rich men are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth. ¹³Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins.

Micah 6:8 and Proverbs 21:1-3 (above) are key to our understanding of what I would view as the most Biblical approach to political issues. Each of these passages direct us to acceptable practices of humble worship through acting justly (*mishpat*) and loving mercy (*cheched*). That is to say, acting justly and loving kindness are acts of worship as we prostrate ourselves before our Lord (compare Psalm 51). Justice and loving kindness must be foundational to all dialogue over political issues as we subject ourselves to the Word of God and our Lord Himself. Not only should these apply to our dialogue, but clearly to our responsive actions and teaching regarding politics.

The intersection of justice, mercy and humility are foundational to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. On the Cross, Christ satisfied the justice and mercy of God by being our substitutionary atonement. He justified us fully by obediently paying the penalty which satisfied the wrath of God. His mercy was perfect in that He took the penalty as our substitute. We could not pay nor bear the due penalty. He willingly bore our transgressions and sins. By his stripes we are healed.

We are called to testify to the Gospel in our communities and churches by carrying out both justice and mercy in a humble manner. We as the Body of Christ have the responsibility to equip our congregants with humble attitudes of justice and mercy as we interact with one

another and as we reach out beyond our members. Church discipline and ‘pastoral’ care reflect justice and mercy within the authority of the Church. Lovingkindness in outreach and mercy ministries leads us outside our doors. Political discourse should prove that we are people who, in subjection to our Savior, express both the need for godly biblical justice and godly biblical mercy no matter the topic.

Political Personalities

The final area to address tends to be the most abrasive concern within the realm of political discourse. Some churches have been known to either endorse or even condemn various political figures. We are mandated by Scripture to pray for our leaders.

1 Timothy 2:1-6 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

Humbling ourselves to God’s mercy and justice draw us to the truth of the Gospel. God has instituted governing officials (and just laws) to bless the citizens of any earthly jurisdiction. We must be in prayer for our leaders. We also, in the United States, have the right, privilege and even the civic duty to address our officials with dignity and respect through the electoral process and even in principled debate and testimony. It is easy to publicly bash or condemn the actions of complete strangers. It is another to face them with appropriate and edifying dialogue while not supporting any ungodly position, but lovingly correcting and rebuking when he or she strays from the truth. When politicians are walking in truth, justice, mercy and godly blessing, we must encourage and support this for the good of the whole community, including the community of Christ.

Jeremiah 29:7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Praying for our leaders and lovingly communicating with them is a first step to fulfilling our calling as citizens of these United States. Additionally, proposing and supporting godly legislation and speaking against ungodly legislation is vital to having a Gospel expression within the community that we live.

Conclusion

If time would permit, there are numerous additional topics and nuances we could address in regard to Gospel political discourse. Big business, economics, regulation, communism, socialism, capitalism are all divisive issues. We could address the role of civil disobedience and political advocacy in more detail. We could elicit political sermon illustrations. We could address the deeper aspects of being Kingdom people, whether the Kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of earth. Recognition of political holidays as an aspect of corporate worship (utilizing ‘patriotic’ hymns, etc.) could honor our freedoms and those who have fought to provide them, yet could be divisive to some.

We, as God’s people speaking God’s truth, need direct responses to the bulleted list of topics above including opponents and proponents of each position. Asking ourselves what is the biblical position in each of these areas of conflict could require entire treatises on each issue.

The Gospel is for everyone and the Gospel speaks to every concern we face. We must be prepared and equipped to address these topics as we face them day to day, hear them on the news and are confronted with them by the membership of our churches and our neighbors in

our community. We should never give in to the temptation to avoid public or ecclesiological discourse when God's truth, justice and mercy are evident and at stake.
So, preach the Word, even if it includes unpopular political positions.

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