

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

Spring 2018

IX 9Marks Journal



OUR TRUE POLITICAL
WITNESS

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

IX 9Marks Journal

info@9marks.org | www.9marks.org

Tools like this are provided by the generous investment of donors.

Each gift to 9Marks helps equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

Donate at: www.9marks.org/donate.

Or make checks payable to "9Marks" and mail to:

9 Marks

525 A St. NE

Washington, DC 20002

For any gift of \$300 (\$25/month), you'll receive two new 9Marks books published throughout the year.

All donations to 9Marks are tax-deductible.

Editorial Director: Jonathan Leeman

Managing Editor: Alex Duke

Layout: Rubner Durais

Cover Design: OpenBox9

Production Manager: Rick Denham & Mary Beth Freeman

9Marks President: Mark Dever

Contents

Editor's Note

Church Life: Our True Political Witness

American Civil Religion and the Gospel Aren't the Same Thing

The Church's Most Powerful Political Word: The Gospel

What the Church Can and Should Bring to the #MeToo Movement

The Local Church as a Counterculture

Understanding Our True Citizenship

Churches Should Say Neither Too Little Nor Too Much

How the State Serves Both Salvation *and* Religious Freedom

How can we work toward greater ethnic unity in our churches?

A Symposium

Why There's No Such Thing as African Christianity

More Christian than Black or White

More Christian Than Democrat or Republican

More Christian Than American

Men, Women, and the Place of True Equality

Just A Spoonful Of Wilberforce

The Dangerous Allure of Being a Cultural Warrior

Why Politics Overwhelms the Church

Editor's Note



Jonathan Leeman

I don't need to tell you that America feels as politically and culturally divided as ever. You probably feel it. Outside of churches, Christians feel increasingly pushed to the outskirts of our national public life. Inside of churches, Christians can't agree over the best way forward or what it means to do justice. A friend from another church emailed me about the arguments his small group was having during the last elections. "It's dangerous to bring up politics," he said. It was hurting old relationships. What do we do?

The goal of this 9Marks Journal is to redirect our political gaze from the nation to the church. Our political hope must not be in the next presidential election, or in trying to win the country "back" or "forward" to something different. Believe it or not, the political hope of the nations is in local churches. If churches represent the kingdom of heaven, then we have to say: heaven first touches down on earth through our churches, not through the voting booth or a court's rulings.

The most powerful political word in this world is the gospel. Abraham Lincoln talked about the need for the United States to

“achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and all nations.” Do you know where the world should first witness this just and lasting peace? In the life and fellowship of the boundary-defying local church. It’s in the local church where we first beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. It’s in the church where one-time enemies learn to love one another.

To be sure, Christians should remain involved in the public square for the sake of love and justice. Russell Moore says this in his piece, as do I in the article on the state serving salvation.

Still, our primary political investment must occur in our churches. We cannot talk with integrity about family values if our marriages are falling apart. Or advocate for tax policy changes if we’re not being generous with fellow believers. In short, churches should think less about redeeming the nation and more about living as a redeemed nation.

My two pieces on the church and the gospel cast the basic vision. John Wilsey, J. D. Greear, and Bruce Ashford’s help disentangle our Christian identity from other forms of identity that threaten to subvert it, whether national or partisan.

Jonathan Worsley and Brian Davis warn against the allure of being a culture warrior. Brett McCracken and Sam Emadi offer a positive picture of what Christians should be: counter-cultural citizens of heaven. Trillia Newbell provides a very concrete and wonderful picture of how the church should be counter-cultural by affirming the equality of men and women. Matthew Arbo, too, captures the balanced picture of churches that neither say too little nor too much, a balance that seems to elude many Christians conversations about the public square.

Three articles in particular deserve a special highlight. Conrad Mbewe reminds us of how wonderfully global Christianity is, and the fact that we are Christians before anything else, no matter how profound those other things are. Isaac Adams and Whitney Woo-

llard then offer what may be the most prophetic and powerful pieces in the Journal. Adams challenges White Christians, “Are you willing to give up your ethnic identity like you’re asking minorities to give up theirs?” Woollard then points to the church’s remarkable opportunity to shine amid this #MeToo moment. We have resources the world doesn’t.

That, in a sense, is the message of the whole Journal. We have the gospel, which means we have the power to change and to do justice and to love righteousness and to honor the dignity of all humanity. No church does this perfectly, to be sure. But that should be our ambition, because we have the righteousness of Christ and the Spirit of God.

So pastor, what would your members say is more powerful: the nationally televised political speeches given every four years before an election, or the political speech they hear every week from your pulpit, calling them to repentance and faith? I hope they know it’s the latter. Your sermons can change the world far more than any party’s national convention. I hope you’re shepherding their hopes and expectations rightly.

Church Life: Our True Political Witness



Jonathan Leeman

My friend and fellow church member Charles is a Washington, DC, speechwriter. He has written speeches for cabinet members, party chairmen, and other DC insiders. Charles's work, to be sure, puts him at the center of American politics.

Charles also spends time with Freddie. Freddie, who was homeless, became a Christian and joined our church. After several good years, the church discovered Freddie was stealing money from members to support a drug addiction, so they removed him from membership. That's when Charles entered the picture. He began reading the Bible with Freddie, and little by little, Freddie began to repent. Eventually Charles helped Freddie stand before the entire church, confess his lying and stealing, and ask for forgiveness. The church clapped, cheered, and embraced Freddie. Charles and Freddie cried for joy.

Here's the GDP-sized question: Which Charles is the "political" Charles? The speechwriter or the disciple-maker? To ask it

another way, which Charles deals with welfare policy, housing policy, criminal reform, and education? Answer: both. In fact, Charles will tell you that the political life of the disciple-maker fashions and gives integrity to the political life of the speechwriter. It's the same man working, the same King ruling, the same principles of justice and righteousness applying, the same politics in play.

This speechwriter has many political hopes for better laws and fairer practices. But the greatest of his political hopes comes to life in the congregation. The local church should be a model political community for the world. It's the most political of assemblies since it represents the One with final judgment over presidents and prime ministers. Together we confront, condemn, and call nations with the light of our King's words and the saltiness of our lives.

Unlike Charles, however, many Christians in America continue to invest their greatest political hopes in the nation. Since colonial times, we have called the nation "a city on the hill." Since Abraham Lincoln's day, we have asked our leaders to provide "a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Yet is it possible that all the contention and division Christians presently face is the catalyst God means to force some of us to rethink where our political hopes really lie?

Just think: Where do we *first* beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks? Where should love of enemy *first* dissolve a nation's tribalism? Where should Lincoln's just and lasting peace *first* take root and grow?

Answer: in our local churches.

WHERE CHRISTIAN POLITICS BEGINS

A Christian politics always begins with Jesus. He's the King of kings and Lord of lords. And we know his will through his Word.

A Christian politics proceeds through the spoken evangelistic word: “The King is coming to judge all transgressors. Repent and believe, and he will graciously pardon.”

A Christian politics then takes root in the individual heart. Only a heart that’s been remade by the Spirit of God will no longer seek to lord it over others, but will extend mercy even as it has received mercy.

Then, remarkably, a Christian politics should become visible in the life and fellowship of the local church—both in its teaching and in its fellowship. Whether you’re a member of this party or that party, the local church is where we learn to love our enemies, forsake our tribalism, and beat our swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. Here is where we tutor one another in the righteousness and justice of God. Here is where the righteousness and justice of God become tangible, credible, and believable for the onlooking nations.

Every week that a preacher stands up to preach he makes a political speech. He teaches the congregation “to observe all” that the King with all authority in heaven and on earth has commanded (Matt. 28:20). He strives to shape their lives in the way of the King’s law. We then declare the King’s judgments in the ordinances, embrace the King’s purposes in our prayers, and echo the King’s joy and mourning in our songs.

POLITICAL POLICY IN A CHURCH

Think through a few areas of political policy. Start, say, with welfare policy. My own church emphasizes “welfare policy,” though perhaps not quite with the same terms. Every member of my church promises in our church covenant to “walk together in brotherly love” and “exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other” as well as to “contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the

ministry” and “the relief of the poor.” In addition to giving to the regular church budget, therefore, members give tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, annually to the church benevolence fund. This is one way we care for our members in need. When member Jane found herself homeless, we tried to place her in safe housing. Due to various mental difficulties, she refused the help and chose to sleep in a park instead. So Luther went to the park with her and slept on a nearby bench. He was deeply concerned for her welfare, to say the least.

We also work on “tax policy.” Carlos, who spends his working days explaining to US Congress the tax implications of new legislation, has spent many evening hours helping a family in crisis with their taxes. He has worked with the family’s creditors and collection agencies because of their uncontrolled debt. Meanwhile, both he and his wife, Sue, tutor their children in various subjects, standardized test preparation, and college application essays.

My church also believes it’s important to address America’s race problem, or at least, our own race problem. When Patty confessed to me one Sunday morning at church that she struggled to like black people, I encouraged her to have dinner with Tom and Laura. “Tell them everything you just told me,” I said. Tom is black.

Tom is godly and mature. And I knew exactly how Tom and his wife would respond. To my half-surprise, Patty did what I suggested. And exactly as I expected, Tom and his wife responded to her with grace, love, and an embrace. Patty repented, and learned to love her brother and sister in Christ.

We could walk through political topic after topic. How about the refugee crises? A pastor friend told me how his church members gave a car to an Iranian refugee who had become a Christian in Iran. They also housed him and disciplined him. Now he is a US citizen and has joined the army. Members of my church in my neighborhood, too, have adopted refugee families from Afghanistan.

HOW CHRISTIAN POLITICS IS PASTORAL

Here's the larger point: Christians should listen to what Republicans and Democrats have to say on welfare policy, tax policy, racial reconciliation, the refugee crisis, and growing suicide rates. But our thinking shouldn't start or stop there. Our thinking should be more expansive, more complicated, more personal, more humane. Our political instincts should develop by living *inside* the loving and difficult relationships that comprise a church. You might even say our political thinking should be *pastoral*.

May I offer a personal confession? I have had a difficult time knowing how to mentally process recent events in American life that have stoked the fires of racial controversy, whether it be the episodes of alleged police brutality, the election of Donald Trump, or larger conversations about the role of so-called structural injustices. Specifically, I find that my political instincts sometimes (not always) veer rightward, even while my personal affections veer strongly toward minority friends and fellow church members who are decidedly to the left of me. I love them. They are my brothers and sisters in Christ. They are close friends. I assume they have good reasons for thinking as they do, and I assume they can see things that I cannot see due to their experiences. So I find my mind divided, and I am utterly uncertain of the correct political solutions.

Yet I don't think that is a bad place to be. Life in a multiethnic church, in other words, is incubating me in humility, understanding, and a desire for justice. It's teaching me to walk and think more carefully, to speak more circumspectly. It's teaching me to love my enemy and look for the plank in my own eye. It's teaching me a better politics. By God's grace, I trust that I will continue to grow, maybe even catch up in my political thinking to brothers and sisters to the left and to the right of me.

Inside the local church is where a Christian politics becomes complicated, authentic, credible, not ideologically enslaved, real. It's

in these real-life situations where you're forced to think about what righteousness truly is, what justice truly requires, what obligations you possess toward your fellow God-imagers, and what you yourself are made of.

POLITICAL WANNABES, JOIN A CHURCH

Keep in mind that the city where I live, Washington, is filled with Christians who have moved here because they love politics and want to make a difference. Then add in all the Christian interest groups and lobbying organizations and prayer breakfasts, and you'll find no shortage of Christian political activity. I'm grateful for much of it.

But if you claim to care about politics and you are not an active member of a local church, I'm tempted to think you don't understand politics at all. You are like someone who claims to love cars because you play with Matchbox cars on the floor making "Vroom!" noises. How easy it is to make pronouncements on political policies from afar. Get up, climb inside a real car, and turn on the ignition. Join a church and figure out how to love the person who looks different from you, or who makes a lot more or less money than you, or who even sins against you.

Real politics begins not with your political opinions but with your everyday decisions, not with public advocacy but with personal affections, not all by your lonesome but with a people.

Christians learn politics, in particular, as we work for unity amid all the reasons we give one another *not* to be united. It's in this battle for unity that we should find the first inflections and glimmers of the just and righteous order, one that should make the nations envy.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article has been taken from *How the Nations Rage* by Jo-

nathan Leeman. Copyright 2018 by Jonathan Leeman. Used by permission of Thomas Nelson. www.thomason.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Leeman is the Editorial Director of 9Marks, and an elder at Cheverly Baptist Church in Cheverly, Maryland. You can find him on Twitter at @JonathanDLeeman.

American Civil Religion and the Gospel Aren't the Same Thing



John D. Wilsey

John Foster Dulles (1888–1959) served as Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Secretary of State from 1953–1959. During those years, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified as both nations sought to interpret the other’s motives and goals, while simultaneously attempting to gain the upper hand on the international scene. Dulles was one of the longest serving Secretaries of State in US history, and at the height of his influence, he became one of the most powerful men in the world. President Eisenhower described him in a 1956 diary entry: “There is probably no one in the world who has the technical competence of Foster Dulles in the diplomatic field.” Most Americans of the period agreed—a 1953 poll showed that only 4 percent of Americans had a negative opinion of Dulles. When he died in 1959, the whole world mourned his loss. The effusive

eulogies at his funeral led former Secretary of State Dean Acheson to gripe, “The greatest mistake I made was not to die in office.”

As secretary of state, Dulles had an intense commitment to the idea of divine chosenness and mission. He believed God had chosen him for the task in order to reinvigorate the American vision of freedom that had inspired the world at its founding. He also thought the American nation had been chosen for a special task: “Our founders were imbued with a deep sense of mission,” he said in 1947. “Our society of freedom would quickly succumb to the overlordship of others if we renounced a sense of mission in the world.”

Dulles derived his commitment to divine mission from his Presbyterian upbringing in late 19th-century, upstate New York. From the early years of World War II through the end of his life, Dulles was convinced that the United States would ultimately prevail over evil forces like Communism because of their spiritual vitality. Furthermore, he believed that American churches had a pivotal role to play in that endeavor.

Dulles believed that Christianity was an active faith, not merely a set of dogmas for the individual to contemplate, isolated from the world. Churches served as a potent safeguard for freedom because they cast a vision for moral law, love, and brotherhood. They were the source of light in the world, scattering the dark philosophies of atheism and Communism.

But toward the end of his career, and certainly after his death, Dulles’ image began to tarnish. People grew tired of what they saw as a moralizing, self-righteous Puritan. Much of his rhetoric mixed warmongering with high-sounding idealism. Terms he coined—like “brinkmanship” and “massive retaliation”—seemed to needlessly provoke America’s rivals and exasperate its allies. By the end of the 20th century, Dulles’ reputation had soured among Americans to the point at which, according to one 1987 study, he ranked among the five worst Secretaries of State in American history.

A few years after his death, his daughter Lillias Dulles Hinshaw assessed her father's honed sense of mission. She was herself an ordained Presbyterian minister, and she reckoned that the brand of theology he inherited from his parents was fraught with both strengths and weaknesses: "Its strengths, I think, like in feeling that you are given a certain task to perform. And of course, its weakness lies in the reverse of that, that you may make the mistake of feeling that you are God's spokesman."

Dulles' career as a diplomat serves as a stark warning for Americans who profess Christ because he often failed to maintain this balance between being driven to our task and mistaking ourselves as God's spokesmen. For example, Dulles often conflated Jesus' Great Commission with the American mission to spread democracy to all parts of the globe. In 1953, he preached at the 150th anniversary of the founding of his home church in Watertown, New York. Directly referencing the Great Commission, he asserted, "the American people . . . availed of every opportunity to spread their gospel of freedom, their good news, throughout the world."

In advancing this message, Dulles characterized America in impossible terms. This episode illustrates how he often failed to maintain the healthy perspective of godly vocation that Lillias articulated. Instead, he appropriated to the nation a messianic character.

Dulles' diplomatic career is defined in the contemporary popular mind by a simplistic, Manichean account of world events. A 2014 biography of the Dulles brothers written by Stephen Kinzer lays sole blame for American involvement in Vietnam at Foster's doorstep. While I suspect that judgment is unfair, Dulles' actions leading up to the Gulf of Tonkin resolution of 1964 does demonstrate how a commitment to national mission leads first to hubris and ultimately to humiliation.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM DULLES

What does all this have to do with American Christians? While Dulles' theological beliefs were liberal, many of his views on the role of the Christian in the world would faithfully align with conservative evangelicals'. He was entirely committed to moral law, the ethical teachings of Jesus, and the indispensability of the church as a force for good in international affairs. Dulles was a sincere patriot with an impeccably moral character; he was devoted to his God as he understood him. He was an affectionate husband, a committed father—and he was dedicated to both his church and his country.

But he also allowed himself to conflate the American mission with the gospel. In so doing, he mistakenly saw America as the hope of the world.

THE CHURCH'S ROLE

Churches have a priestly and a prophetic role in the public square. When the church honors and intercedes on behalf of civic leaders, obeys the law, and seeks the good of others, it serves this priestly role. It stands as a mediator between God and the state. Sometimes, however, the church must raise its voice in warning to the state. When the state's laws are unjust, when its customs are reprobate, or when its leaders evade the truth, the church must stand and proclaim the truth, no matter the consequences.

At its best, civil religion can instill gratitude for the blessings of any particular nation. It can point citizens to take their nation's history seriously, with all its glories and failures. By extension, civil religion can also provide examples of past leaders who have been faithful to come alongside the nation when it has been faithful to its ideals, as well as those who've called the nation to account when it's been unfaithful.

But civil religion, when it remains unevaluated and unchecked by the Word of God, can easily run amok. It can present the nation as God, as the savior of the world, as the last best hope on earth. Christians must not be swayed by the siren songs of civil religion, which can so readily offer a false sense of security in ideals, riches, and power. This is true in many places, but especially in America.

When we're tempted to place our faith in American civil religion to the exclusion of the gospel, let us heed the words of the prophet Jeremiah: "Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.' . . . There is none like You, O LORD; You are great, and great is Your name in might. Who would not fear You, O King of the nations? Indeed it is Your due! For among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like You" (Jer 7:4, 10:6–7).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John D. Wilsey is Associate Professor of Church History at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and currently writing a religious biography of John Foster Dulles, which will be published by Eerdmans in the Library of Religious Biography series.

The Church's Most Powerful Political Word: The Gospel



Jonathan Leeman

It's a tough political moment for American evangelicals. There's bickering inside and outside of our churches. Minorities feel increasingly estranged from white churches. Many worry about a loss of moral credibility in light of recent political alliances.

One religion reporter at *The Atlantic* called it “a time for reckoning with evangelicals’ relationship to politics.” Another at the *New York Times* offered a heart-breaking piece entitled, “A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches.” And Mark Galli, editor-in-chief at *Christianity Today*, has observed that “evangelicals on the left and right are utterly embarrassed by each other.”

The reasons offered for all the bickering are predictable: the 2016 elections, widespread evangelical support of Trump, white resistance to Black Lives Matter, pastors playing politics by endor-

sing candidates, churches acting like auxiliaries of the Democrat or Republican parties, and so forth. The result of all this: “Evangelical Christianity has a PR problem,” observes one Christian university professor in the book *Still Evangelical?*

First off, let me say, we shouldn’t be surprised when the world is upset with us. The Bible tells us the nations rage against the Lord and against his Anointed—Jesus. If we adopted all the politically correct policy postures, would the world’s rage really stop? Hardly. And if it did, what would it say about whose side we were on—the nations’ or the Lord’s? Lest we be overly concerned about our present political PR problem, it’s worth realizing that the world won’t oppose Christians merely because we say, “We love Jesus.” They’ll oppose us because of what we say Jesus requires in their lives and ours. Jesus is a king. He’s political. He makes demands, and specific ones at that. So if you would follow this king, get used to the rage.

That said, yes, we Christians do deserve blame for our present PR problems. Yet those problems didn’t begin in the 2016 elections; or amidst the strong emotional reactions from the Left against Bush or the Right against Obama; or with the missteps of the moral majority in the 1980s; or with our reactions to the passing of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 or in the previous decade’s Sexual Revolution; or amidst Christian support for Jim Crow or even slavery in the decades and centuries before that.

Instead, many of our present political troubles root in something deeper and older still. Too often, we Christians become more interested in the kingdoms we can build in this world than the kingdom of Christ. And this has plagued American Christians since colonial days whenever our forbearers sought to make America—not the church—a city on the hill.

Read John Wilsey’s excellent *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion* (or my review which summarizes it here; or his 9Marks summary here) to see how the idolatry of nation perverted

Christianity and played a huge role in so many of our its historical sins. Too easily we have invested our highest political hopes in the nation, or in our view of what a nation should be. And such utopianism and idolatry leads to intemperate political engagement at best, injustice and oppression at worst.

It's high time to stop that. Evangelicals instead need to rethink their overall relationship to politics and the public square. Step one of that—and my topic here—is to recognize where our real political power comes from, to recognize that the most powerful political word in the world is—are you ready for this?—the gospel.

A MESSAGE THAT INAUGURATES A KINGDOM

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Peter confessed to Peter (Matt. 16:16). That's the confession which would inaugurate a whole new kingdom. And nothing is as politically powerful as a message that inaugurates a kingdom, especially a global one that crosses physical, ethnic, cultural, and language boundaries.

The message, “Jesus is king,” is not just “political” metaphorically, as when we speak of “university politics” or “office politics.” It's political fully and entirely. It applies to all humanity. It means to bind every life and radically change it. It's a message that says we obey our governments *merely because we owe obedience to King Jesus*. We obey them because we obey him. Meaning: governments are not absolute. Their authority is contingent and relative. And make no mistake: that's a threat to them. Persecution makes sense from the perspective of a government who believes its rule is supreme.

I love Michael Horton's reflections on the political nature of our message and work. He observes,

As a minister, I am called regularly by God to make a political speech. A deeply partisan political speech. However, it is not to rally the troops in defense of Christendom against the infidels of various sorts. It divides not between Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, but between Christ and Antichrist.¹

Preaching, it would seem, is political. So is evangelism. Both kinds of speech call people to bow before a king whose claims are higher than all other kings'. Humanity's allegiance to these lesser kings derives from humanity's obligation to the King of kings.

Think of Jonah's sermon in Ninevah: "Judgment's coming!" (see Jonah 3:4). Immediately the city "believed God" and repented. Jonah's speech was evangelistic, yes, but can you think of a more powerful political speech than his? It changed a city. And Jonah was not seeking to install an Israelite king. This was a foreign city. Nineveh is no different than Washington or Moscow in terms of where it's located in the Bible's redemptive storyline.

Behind the political nature of our preaching and evangelism is a political message—the gospel.

CHRISTIANITY AS IDENTITY POLITICS

To put it another way, Christianity offers its own identity politics. It says that our union with Christ becomes the most fundamental thing about us. It's all-defining for our identity. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Who now am "I"? I don't stop being "Jonathan," son of a Leeman, white, American, male, middle-class, proud, opinionated, and so forth. But now all those things get put into subjection to Jesus. He gets to define, redefine, or throw those

¹ Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 164.

things out altogether. He gets to tell me what to do with the different components of who “I” am, whether those parts are good or sinful.

So it is with everyone who is born again of the Spirit and declared a citizen of heaven. Which means, I now belong to a Christian group or a tribe, set in the midst of so many other politically-significant tribes and nations. And my Christian tribe is going to make demands on my life individually and on our life together as a tribe. Jesus is going to say our lives should look a certain way. Some of those things outsiders will like. Others they won't.

But make no mistake, our message and our existence as a people is nothing if not political—just as the groups identified and protected by identity politics generally is political.

THE POLITICS OF SOLA FIDE²

The Christian tribe, however, possesses a different kind of identity politics because group membership begins not with something internal to us. We don't belong to the group because we were born to these parents, or in this nation, or with this skin color, or with these moral credentials. Our citizenship depends entirely upon the righteousness of Christ, and we possess that righteous standing by faith.

Let me back up. Identity politics, most fundamentally, is an enterprise for justification. It's a way of saying that “This group deserves to exist and be recognized.” And when a group has been unfairly oppressed, that's a righteous enterprise.

The trouble is, too often we employ our this-world identities as an argument (or justification) to dominate others. Ideologues justify themselves by their wisdom (“I'm more commu-

² I have discussed the politics of *sola fide* at length in *Political Church* (IVP, 2016), 316-30; *How the Nations Rage* (Thomas Nelson, 2018), 57-61; and “A Traditional Protestant Formulation of *Sola Fide* as the Source of Political Unity” in *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*.

nist/conservative/progressive than you”). Supremacists justify themselves by their skin color (“I’m whiter/lighter than you.”) Nationalists by their nation (“I’m more German/Serbian/Hutu than you.”). The Pharisees pointed to their works (“I’m more righteous than you”). Self- or group-justification, you might say, always leads to self- or group-enthronement. I can rule over you only after I have justified that rule. Rule and justification are correlates. I feel justified in dominating you because of *this thing* about me.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone, however, robs me of *this thing* as a source of social or political standing. *Sola fide* says, “No, you’re not better than anyone because you’re white, wealthy, or wise.” It brings all such self- or group-vindicating arguments to an end. It stops our mouths and declares us all guilty before God’s throne. It says we can only possess standing before God and all who belong to God’s kingdom based on something external: the righteousness of Christ. In the process, *sola fide* robs political actors of the incentives to warfare and domination by giving them that which all people, tribes, nations, and armies primarily seek—justification, standing, the recognition of existence.

The most politically powerful phrase in the Bible just might be “Where then is boasting!” (Rom. 3:27). Boasting, after all, is the root of all domination and coercion. We quarrel, fight, and murder because we desire and do not have, covet and cannot obtain (James 4:1–2). But now the need to say, “I follow Paul” or “I follow Apollos” or “I am a Communist” or “I am a Democrat” or “I am a Republican” or “I am Hutu” or “I am a Tutsi” is extinguished because no one should “boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21–23). In an assembly of those justified by faith, there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). Those political

categories that divide the world are relativized and made subject to our identity in Christ.

Sola fide, in short, ends boasting, levels all hierarchies, and produces peace. It is history's unexpected source of political unity.

I say unexpected because the idea that a person can in some sense be considered just “by faith” and not by his or her activity, to a political philosopher, sounds like cheating the system. It seems to gut the word “justice” of the very thing it needs—action or works. This has led many to critique *sola fide* outright, or at least to treat the doctrine as non-political. Yet the doctrine of justification does not merely have political *implications*; it is a political doctrine outright. “The concept of justice is coextensive with the political,”³ observes political theorist Iris Marion Young. After all, a just or righteous person, at a bare minimum, stands in a right position with respect to a governing authority and body politic. This means that declaring someone just or righteous is often a political statement, involving vertical and horizontal dimensions.

God's verdict of “Righteous” to his saints is a covenantal verdict. It declares us righteous according to the terms of the New Covenant. It's not just a legal declaration, it's a political declaration. To be declared right by the judge is to be declared right before everyone else in the courtroom.

THE POLITICS OF CONVERSION

Think about all this in terms of a Christian understanding of conversion. If your doctrine of conversion is missing a corporate and political element, it's missing an essential piece of the whole.⁴

A covenant head comes with a covenant people.

To be sure, our individual justification and reconciliation before God comes first. There can be no true reconciliation be-

³ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 9.

⁴ For more on this topic, see my article “The Corporate Component of Conversion,” <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalcorporate-component-conversion/>

tween humans until individual sinners first reconcile with God. But the horizontal necessarily follows the vertical. Ecclesiology necessarily follows soteriology. The corporate must come. Our corporate unity in Christ is not just an implication of conversion, it's part of the very thing. Notice Peter's parallel statements:

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:10)

Receiving mercy (vertical reconciliation) is simultaneous to becoming a people (horizontal reconciliation). God has mercy on us by forgiving our sins, and a necessary consequence of that is inclusion in his people.

The same lesson is put on display wonderfully in Ephesians 2. Verses 1 to 10 explain forgiveness and our vertical reconciliation with God: "By grace you have been saved." Verses 11 to 20 then present the horizontal: "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (v. 14). Christ has *already made*—past tense—Jew and Gentile one. There is no imperative here. Paul is not commanding his readers to pursue unity. Instead, he's speaking in the indicative. It's what they *are* because God has done it, and God *did* it in precisely the same place he accomplished the vertical reconciliation—in the cross of Christ (see also the relationship between indicative and imperative in Eph. 4:1–6).

By virtue of Christ's new covenant, corporate unity belongs to the indicative of conversion. To be converted is to be made a member of Christ's body. Our new identity contains an ecclesial element. Christ has made us ecclesial persons.

Here's an easy way to see it. When mom and dad go down to the orphanage to adopt a son, they bring him home and place him at the family dinner table with a new set of brothers and sisters. To

be a son is not the same thing as being a brother. Sonship comes first, but brotherhood follows necessarily.

That is to say, conversion signs you up for a family photo. It places you into the Christian tribe. And membership into that tribe quickly proves politically significant to everyone outside of that tribe. Just think of how your relationships with your non-Christian friends or family members *changed* when you told them you were a Christian now.

THE UNIQUENESS OF A GOSPEL POLITICS

Because a Christian identity politics or a gospel politics doesn't start with something inside or natural to us, it's unlike any other brand of identity or nationalistic or partisan politics. Every other form seeks to honor itself. Democrats fight for democrats, whites for whites, Americans for Americans. Yet a politics that begins with *sola fide* fights for the good of others. It loves the enemy. It turns the cheek. It walks two miles when only one is asked for. Remember, it's not pointing to anything in itself. Instead, it wants to extend the grace and mercy and freedom it's discovered to all.

A gospel politics, rightly understood, doesn't pretend the discriminations and injustices of this world don't exist. It's not "color-blind" in that sense. Instead, it means to acknowledge the injustices different groups of people have encountered. What's more, it no longer needs to defend itself, as in, "I didn't do it. Don't blame me!" Rather, it's willing to accept blame and then extend its resources to help others because its justification comes from Christ. In fact, a gospel politics will wield the sword for the very purposes of establishing justice among those who have been denied it. It recognizes that *all* people have been created in God's image.

Here, indeed, is what should make a gospel politics stand apart. It seeks not its own good, but the good of all within its jurisdiction, each according to one's obligations (my obligation to my children is greater than my obligation to your chil-

dren, for instance), because all are made in God's image. The Christian tribe exists not to protect itself but for the purposes of loving God and loving other tribes.

SALT THAT HAS LOST ITS SALTINESS

Former Bush speech writer Michael Gerson recently argued in *The Atlantic* that “modern evangelicalism has an important intellectual piece missing. It lacks a model or ideal of political engagement—an organizing theory of social action.” I’m not sure that’s right. Plenty of Christian practitioners and theorists have offered their agenda or theory of social action.

Where I’m sympathetic to Gerson, however, is that too often our view of political engagement forgets about our most powerful word, the gospel. It’s not enough to simply say, “The Bible emphasizes social justice” or “universal moral laws” or whatever. When that’s our only word, we sound like every other interest group, pushing a self-interested law. It’s the path of moralism and shame-casting. We then become like salt that’s lost its saltiness, which Jesus says might as well be thrown out. With Gerson, then, I’d say we need a better model or ideal, and a truly *Christian* (read: gospel grounded) one.

Until then, we’ll continue to have self-caused PR problems. David French, I fear, is right on point here:

Evangelicals aren’t worse than other American political tribes. Instead, we’re proving that in politics we’re just like everyone else. In other words, the true sin of white American Evangelicalism isn’t that we’re exceptionally bad, it’s that we’re not exceptional at all.

The solution is not to pretend we’ll ever be morally perfect people. That’s just more moralism. The solution instead is to realize that political power must always begin with the gospel. It

alone possesses the ability to change a heart, produce true justice, and permanently unite enemies. This occurs, of course, primarily in the church. We're the only ones with resources for that kind of true, boundary-dissolving diversity.

And yet, knowing that political power begins in the gospel changes our expectations for the public square, too. It causes us to downsize our expectations. It helps us to repent of our utopianism, and to acknowledge that all the activities of the public square belong in a peripheral position. Yes, we continue to work hard in the public square for the sake of loving neighbor and doing justice. God commands it! But we're not trying to bring heaven to earth there. And what happens there suddenly becomes a little less important than we thought.

Our gospel, the gospel of justification by faith alone, is profoundly political. It creates a new body politic, one where there's no boasting. And it sends us as ambassadors with a message of peace for all who would look to King Jesus and live.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Leeman is the Editorial Director of 9Marks, and an elder at Cheverly Baptist Church in Cheverly, Maryland. You can find him on Twitter at @JonathanDLeeman.

What the Church Can and Should Bring to the #MeToo Movement



Whitney Woollard

If you think #MeToo is another transitory wave of social media outrage, think again. Harvey Weinstein's out and the #MeToo Oscars are over, but the movement doesn't appear to be going anywhere. This worldwide phenomenon has created a palpable culture shift as countless survivors of sexual violence and harassment have come forward to share their stories and give voice to hurting women. A collective voice that can no longer be ignored, swept under the rug, or paid off. And as a conservative Christian female, I rejoice in this! I see it both as a common grace from God and a unique opportunity for the church.

A MEANS OF COMMON GRACE

Like any movement, #MeToo is imperfect, but that shouldn't prevent us from appreciating it as an expression of God's com-

mon grace. He restrains evil and pours out graciousness on all people, enabling even those outside of Christ to do good, carry out justice, and promote human flourishing. It's not salvific, but it is *good*.

Here are some evidences of God's common grace in #MeToo:

1. **#MeToo is dragging wickedness into the light.** Wickedness *hates* the light, even common-grace light. Look to Larry Nassar and his 150+ victims to see a personification of the way evil flourishes in the dark. Imagine how sunlight burst into that Michigan courtroom as one girl after another exposed his wickedness. My pastor remarked, "Sunlight has a very powerful disinfectant nature to it." It exposes the abuser, making it that much harder for him to operate, and initiates healing for the abused. If I ever have a little girl, I want her to live in a world where she can become a gymnast, lawyer, or CEO without living in fear of sexual abuse or feeling pressured to give sexual favors to keep her place in society. If #MeToo is making that more possible, then let's rejoice.
2. **#MeToo is forcing a conversation everyone would rather not have.** The Internet has changed the game. If HR won't take me seriously, then I can go to Twitter where my voice will be heard. Everywhere we look, survivors are sharing their stories of abuse and calling for accountability. We *can't* ignore the conversation anymore. Men are talking to women, trying to understand their experiences. Men are talking to other men, asking uncomfortable questions (e.g., Am I doing or saying anything that makes women feel vulnerable and unsafe?). Women are talking to other women, sharing in their trauma together. Many are reassessing the sexual revolution, questioning how to define freedom in a way that doesn't lead to the dehuman-

nizing and objectifying of our gender. The point is, we're talking. And that's a good thing.

3 #MeToo is teaching women that abuse and harassment is real and wrong. It has removed the cloak of guilt and shame that has long encumbered abuse survivors. They are now empowered to fight back. Praise God! Women *should* speak up without fear of being a burden or being labeled as a drama queen. Historically, sexual harassment has been the “norm,” so we rationalize sexist comments at work or the overly touchy elder at church or even the touch of an abuser. God forbid we make anyone uncomfortable. However, #MeToo is exposing that women's daily lives can range from uncomfortable to unsafe simply because of our gender.

Don't believe me? Yesterday I left my house for *one hour* and encountered a man in a semi-isolated spot who told me “if women don't watch out, white men are going to start fighting back against #MeToo” and we should “fear the force with which their wave would hit us.” Then I was cornered at a crosswalk by a man who yelled sexual obscenities at me, saying, “I'm sorry but I have to because, God, you're so (bleeping) hot.” (FYI: I was wearing a baggy sweatshirt and loose jeans.) I felt uncomfortable and unsafe, yet unsure of how to respond without calling more attention to myself. I grew up thinking you just smiled and laughed that stuff off. But now I rejoice in a new era where that speech and behavior are unacceptable and where women are taught to stop inappropriate comments or “playful” touches and say, “Stop right now. This is making me uncomfortable.” This is common grace at work.

Great things are happening through #MeToo. Christians can and should celebrate. But again, like any movement, it has

its problems, inconsistencies, and doesn't offer us pure good. There's *much* to be desired in terms of adequate justice, healing, restoration, and reconciliation. I wonder: when all the hubbub dies down, what will happen to these traumatized survivors? What will happen to the high-school girl who's been raped under the banner of "consent"? Or the young professional forced to give oral sex to keep her job? Survivors like these still have to deal with the fallout of abuse; they have to learn to live from a place of healing, not brokenness.

The world doesn't have the tools to offer *that* kind of redemption. But thankfully, the church does.

THE CHURCH HAS ANSWERS THE CULTURE NEEDS

#MeToo has given voice to 17,700,000 sexual assault survivors since 1998. But what now? There are millions of women who need more than a voice. They need hope, healing, and restoration. In other words, *they need the church*.

Note, however, that polity matters. Not all church structures are built to protect the vulnerable and abused. In hierarchical structures, it's all too easy for the church to become the place of abuse and the protector of abusers. One thinks of the frequent sexual allegations brought against the Catholic Church.

I've also found this to be true of independent, elder-ruled churches where there's no safeguard in place to keep it from becoming a boys' club. That's why there has to be some protective mechanism built into every church's policy that allows for complaints to arise and female voices to be heard. I'm convinced that male elder-led congregationalism is one answer to this. But I digress.

Assuming we're talking about a healthy church with good structures and policies in place, what does the church have to bring to #MeToo?

1. The church has the gospel. The good news that God the Son came to earth to enter into our suffering, to go to the cross and die for our sins and take away our shame, and then to rise from the dead and ascend into heaven where he will pour out the Spirit and intercede on our behalf (1 Cor. 15:3–4; Heb. 4:14–16)—this good news is the *only* message powerful enough to save, cleanse, and restore a woman who has experienced assault.

Survivors of sexual abuse often tell me the first thing they want to do after being attacked is to take a shower. Some even develop compulsive cleansing habits where they scrub their skin raw in an ever-elusive attempt to feel “clean.” These women need to hear that God can save them through the “washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Tit. 3:5) and that the blood of Jesus has the power to “cleanse us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7), including those sins committed against them.

2. The church has a biblical bias. #MeToo has exposed Hollywood’s bias toward the rich and powerful. I don’t foresee that changing. The world has always exalted the rich and powerful at the expense of the weak and poor. But the church worships a God who has made it his personal agenda to defend the most vulnerable. He takes special interest in the plight of the orphan, the widow, the alien, the oppressed, and the abused (Deut. 10:17–18), executing justice on their behalf and bringing the wicked to ruin (Ps. 146:7–9).

In our age of moral outrage, it’s important to remember that that *no one is more outraged over this evil than God*. The church displays the heart of our defender God by assuming this bias toward broken women. We don’t show partiality as we mete out justice, but we *do* recognize the power structu-

res in place that perpetuate injustice. In response, we choose to move toward the oppressed and vulnerable, creating safe spaces in which they can share their story and be heard, loved, and cared for.

- 3. The church has member care.** This assumes your church has membership in place intended to care and account for your flock. Many survivors who make it out often find themselves without a home, financial stability, or a job. How do they move forward to rebuild their lives?

The church can often offer temporary housing, benevolent financing, connections to a new job, meals for working single mothers, practical help around the house, counseling, friendship, protection—and the list goes on and on. Members can walk alongside broken women, listen to their stories, affirm their pain, and speak truth into their lives. I've often gone to therapy with women just so they feel more comfortable. Elders are there to step in if a situation gets turbulent, or if there's sexual abuse *within marriage*, something #MeToo hasn't even begun to address. One church I know of did exactly that. They moved the wife and children into an elder's home and put the husband under discipline while they walked through the healing process, including first steps like counseling and care.

- 4. The church has corrective and formative discipline.** America was hypnotized as Judge Rosemary Aquilina sentenced Larry Nassar to life in prison with these words: "I just signed your death warrant." Why? Because we long for justice.

And yet, many cases of genuine abuse never rise to the level of civil or criminal action, leaving the survivor to feel like there's no justice. In church discipline, however, we

have the unique opportunity to carry out a form of justice in the lives of our members.

But I want to be clear: church discipline is *never* a replacement for the legal process. Pastors should *always* encourage victims to actively engage with the appropriate legal and governmental authorities. We need to be clear as to where the church's authority begins and ends, and where the government's authority begins and ends.

That said, corrective discipline addresses the abuse, corrects the abuser, and has a restorative function for the abused. It validates her pain and tells her that the church is a *safe place* for her. It also sends a strong message to the abuser—or potential abuser—that this is *not* a safe place for him or her to operate. Elders must trust God as they deal with credible allegations, regardless of the institutional cost. Protecting the vulnerable is paramount.

Moreover, we use formative discipline to create a safe culture. It puts practices and policies in place (e.g., two people in nursery at all times, or doing personal counseling in rooms with windows or a door open). These practical choices preemptively safeguard women and children. Good discipline always provides protection; it never gives license to further abuse. Ever.

5. The church has a theology of *imago Dei*. Sexual abuse and harassment seeks to objectify and dehumanize. It treats humans like animals. The fact that #MeToo is exposing such systemic evil in our culture says that somewhere along the way society accepted the ideology that women were less than human; somewhere along the way, we became objects for men to use.

The church rejects this evil based on the truth that both men and women are image-bearers of God, equal in digni-

ty, value, and worth (Gen. 1:27). In the church, women are esteemed as those whom Christ died for, equal recipients of God's saving grace and co-heirs in Christ alongside our male brothers. We should therefore cultivate a high view of women, making provision for their giftings and personalities in all the ways the Bible encourages. And yet, we also esteem women made in God's image by celebrating the *differences* between males and females, refusing to flatten gender distinctions and roles because we know this will only lead to more confusion, more dehumanizing, and more pain. Even as we celebrate our culture's rejection of sexual harassment, we remain counter-cultural by embodying God's vision for human flourishing that insists on the goodness of humans created as male and female.

As supporters and advocates grapple with what's next for #MeToo, can you imagine the transformation that could take place in our culture as the church holds out these resources? Of course, many churches won't have all of the resources yet, but we can work toward these aspirations.

More importantly, we all have the gospel to tenderly apply to broken women. Oh, how I envision broken women of all ages, ethnicities, and races streaming into the church to take hold of the hope and healing that can be theirs in Christ Jesus our Lord. The moment is ripe. A new day is dawning, and the way we conduct our church life has the power to be a paradigm-shifting witness to the watching world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Whitney Woollard is a writer, speaker, and women's Bible teacher in Portland, Oregon, where she and her husband Neal attend Hinson Baptist Church. She holds her M.A. in biblical and theological

studies from Western Seminary and loves sharing her passion for the Bible and good theology with others. You can check out her work at her website, www.whitneywoollard.com.

The Local Church as a Counterculture



Brett McCracken

Friedrich Nietzsche was perhaps the most towering figure among 19th century philosophers and thinkers, those whom Richard Lints has called “secular prophets.” Alongside people like Marx, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Freud, Nietzsche leveled new critiques against religion and positioned Christianity as a sort of idolatry—a made-in-man’s-own-image mythology to cope with the challenges of existence.

Nietzsche was the most bold and colorful of these “prophets.” He called Christianity the “religion of pity”—or, worse, the “religion of comfortableness.”

In Nietzsche’s worldview, growth required humans to confront their weaknesses and face the meaninglessness of life head on, recognizing that the suffering and brutality of life is simply part of becoming stronger. To avoid or minimize pain, or to delude yourself by valorizing weakness, was to limit your capacity for happiness.

In Nietzsche's view, Christianity was for weak people; it was a narcotic that stilted one's capacity to address their own shortcomings and numbed their capacity to experience joy.

Alain de Botton summarizes Nietzsche's view of Christianity:

Christianity had, in Nietzsche's account, emerged from the minds of timid slaves in the Roman Empire who had lacked the stomach to climb to the tops of mountains, and so had built themselves a philosophy claiming that their bases were delightful... They had fashioned a hypocritical creed denouncing what they wanted but were too weak to fight for while praising what they did not want but happened to have. Powerlessness became "goodness," baseness "humility," submission to people one hated "obedience," and, in Nietzsche's phrase, "not-being-able-to-take-revenge" turned into "forgiveness." Every feeling of weakness was overlaid with a sanctifying name, and made to seem "a voluntary achievement, something wanted, chosen a *deed*, an *accomplishment*." Addicted to "the religion of comfortableness," Christians, in their value system, had given precedence to what was easy, not what was desirable, and so had drained life of its potential. (*The Consolations of Philosophy*, 237–38)

WAS NIETZSCHE RIGHT?

So, was Nietzsche right to call Christianity "the religion of comfortableness"? Was he correct to see Christianity as an uncourageous, convenient system to escape the difficulties of life and the cruelties of nature?

Certainly we must admit that in many times and places in history—like in his own 19th century European context—Christianity *has* been rather comfortable, uncourageous, and unwilling to truly embrace the costly call of Jesus Christ. And for many in the American church today, Christianity is indeed a religion of escape and comfort, a faith that doesn't ask much and doesn't cost anything. It's a religion of Moralistic

Therapeutic Deism. So in *that* sense, perhaps Nietzsche's critique is right.

But Nietzsche is wrong to suggest there's something *inherently* comfortable about Christianity, that it in its very essence Christianity is a convenient, disingenuous system of consolation for the weak people of the world.

That's patently untrue. In my recent book, *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community*, I go into great detail describing all the ways Christianity is actually inherently *uncomfortable*, both in what it asserts and calls us to believe, and perhaps especially in how it calls us to *live* and function together as the local church.

The local church was never meant to be a cultural, comfortable, bourgeois social club that affirms people in their idolatry and helps them along on a journey to their "best life now." On the contrary, it was meant to be a counterculture, a set-apart community embodying a radically different vision for human flourishing.

EMBRACING THE CHURCH'S COUNTERCULTURAL IDENTITY

What would it mean for local churches to embrace their countercultural identity?

There's much that could be said about this, but perhaps at the most basic level we must start by retiring our pragmatic obsession with the word "relevant." The ironic thing about relevance is that when you self-consciously strive for it, it's often the fastest track to *irrelevance*. When you have to draw attention to all the ways you are relevant, your lack of it becomes awkwardly obvious.

True relevance for the church will come insofar as we pay less attention to our seeming irrelevance in the world, and more attention to our reverence before God and faithfulness to our mission. We must come to terms with the fact that, as John Stott

once put it, “It is not possible to be faithful and popular simultaneously.”

Or, as Jesus said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18).

We need to be OK with being unpopular, with being on the outside of the inner-ring. To be sure, we shouldn’t *go out of our way* to incite the world’s hatred and we should be careful that our unpopularity stems from faithfulness, not hypocrisy. We should also be careful to avoid wearing our fringe status as a badge of honor. But we do need to come to terms with it.

FOUR REMINDERS OF THE CHURCH’S COUNTERCULTURAL IDENTITY

We don’t need to look far, or strain our imaginations, to see clearly how Christianity is countercultural. But sometimes we do need to see with fresh eyes.

Where Christianity is well-established and culturally ingrained, it’s easier to lose sight of just how revolutionary the church should be. After all, church can feel painfully normal, even boring. This often leads to a lack of confidence and a sinking sense of irrelevance that leads some Christians down the dangerous, heresy-prone path of seeking “relevance” by reinventing the wheel.

But the wheel needs no reinvention. It simply needs to be recognized, owned, embraced, and compellingly lived out as the radical and beautiful thing it is.

Here are five aspects of the church’s countercultural identity that we would do well to remember:

1. Countercultural Presence

The church has always been a physical, embodied gathering in which God’s people pray and sing and break bread together. We take this for granted and forget just how radical this is. What

else in the world today brings different people together with such regularity?

This is especially jarring in today's world, where the trajectory is away from incarnational presence and toward disembodied experiences. We increasingly live our lives via screens, apps, and phones. Our relationships are largely digital. This both amplifies our preexisting Gnostic tendencies toward a cerebral rather than embodied faith, and subtly deemphasizes the crucial physicality of the church as the "body of Christ" in the material not just theoretical sense.

In such a world, the church's physical gathering in a common space for a few hours on a Sunday is a revolutionary act.

We need to recognize what a countercultural gift this is. Churches today should emphasize the physicality of worship and liturgy, the practice of the Lord's Supper, passing the peace, bodily movement in worship, shaking hands and hugging each other—anything to remind their congregations that we are here, *together*, in the presence of God.

One of the greatest gifts of the 21st-century church will be to re-sensitize people to the incarnational reality of what it means to be human.

2. Countercultural Family

Another gift the church can offer the 21st century is to remind people that they are created as *relational* beings meant to flourish in community.

Christianity isn't just a solo affair, as much as we've made it that in our individualistic, "I'll just listen to the podcast" culture. Christianity isn't compatible with a "just you and Jesus" spirituality. Christianity is plural, and the church is a family. Across generations, cultures, races, and genders, we are united in Christ as brothers and sisters. I can't underscore enough how important this is, nor should we neglect the urgency of striving to embody it.

At a time of great division in our culture, the church's naturally diverse makeup—if we're intentionally fostering it in our communities—can offer something different and hopeful to the world. The vision we get of heaven in Revelation is that every nation, every tribe, every people, and every language will be worshiping God together. In other words, our differences won't be eradicated in heaven. They'll still be there—but we'll all be worshiping God together.

Embodied unity amid diversity is one big way the church can embrace its nature as an eschatological community—a glimpse “now” of what is to come in the “not yet.”

3. Countercultural Change

The Christian church should be a place where transformation happens. Christianity doesn't just say “you're OK as you are.” It's a faith that meets us where we are and doesn't let us stay there. It's a faith with a realistic, sober understanding of sin and injustice in our world, but it's not resigned to fatefully accept them as unchangeable.

The local church is the primary place where transformation can happen. In a context of accountability, church members will strive together, as a community of broken sinners, to move in the direction of holiness. We speak truth in love to one another so that we can grow and change.

This is extremely countercultural in a world that insists, “You are just fine as you are. No one has the right to say you should change.” Even within many Christian churches, the pursuit of holiness is often less compelling to us than the pursuit of “authenticity.” Sadly, we often follow the world in being more interested to talk about our brokenness than we are to pursue wholeness.

But distinctly Christian community isn't primarily about solidarity in brokenness. It's about solidarity in seeking Christ-likeness, in growing in holiness together.

When we downplay the importance of holiness and change, our churches end up looking, talking, and living exactly like anyone else in the world. Over time, we lose any sense of being different. But it's our *difference* as salt and light in a dark world that makes the church attractive.

As Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "The glory of the gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it." A commitment to pursuing holiness—only made possible through the blood of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit—is a critical mark of the countercultural church.

4. Countercultural Mission

Forgetfulness about our mission in the world is often where the apathy, boredom, and inferiority complex of Christians begins.

We must always remember—and keep front-and-center—the church's radical and countercultural mission. In short, this mission isn't not about us. It's not a self-help mission. It *is* about our growth and change, but it isn't for our own sake. It's about our lives bearing witness to the gospel and the glory of Jesus Christ.

Christians actually believe our best life is still to come, and this conviction allows us to endure pain and suffering and "count it all joy." For us, the "best life" we could have now comes by pouring it out for others and by sacrificing our comfort for a greater purpose.

What a radical proposition in today's consumerist society, which frames everything in terms of self. Bettering yourself. Self-actualization. Self-promotion. Self-preservation. Selfhood. Selfies.

Which brings us back to Nietzsche, because this was exactly what he was about. For Nietzsche, the individual self mattered most—the will to power. He was an early adopter of the whole the now popular "best life now," "carpe diem" mentality that domina-

tes the covers of books and magazines—from suburban grocery stores to airport bookstores. For Nietzsche, and for so many in today’s world, the self is the only thing to live for.

But living only for yourself leads to death.

The subversive suggestion of Christianity is that life comes when we look outside of ourselves and instead find our identity in Jesus, the true image of God. Rather than flourishing by “finding yourself,” and then demanding the world recognize the glory of your individuality, Christianity tells you to deny yourself (Matt. 16:24), to lose your life in order to find it (Matt. 10:39).

This sounds harsh but it’s ultimately freeing, as it lifts from us the heavy burden of narcissism and autonomy. Furthermore, by calling us into a community—as “living stones” who are “being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5)—Christianity invites us to be part of a structure that’s bigger and stronger and infinitely more glorious than we could ever be on our own.

A couple years ago, I received an email from a reader who described himself as a “lapsed, lazy, backsliding, and confused” Christian. He wrote:

I don’t want church to be a mirror image of my life, in all its uncertainty and weakness. I want church to be church, to be challenged, to disagree (not be cozily affirmed), to be my refuge and my rock. I may be someone who cusses from time to time myself, who gets drunk, who has done lots of things I shouldn’t have done (and still do), but that doesn’t mean I want to be seeing those things where I (very occasionally) worship. The point of church and faith is that they are sanctuaries from ourselves, they are places where we can lay it all down and know that God hears us, that he forgives us, and that we are only saved by his grace.

The church’s appeal comes insofar as it offers something *different*—a reprieve from the world, a sanctuary from ourselves. The church that will change the world is one that provides a refres-

hing alternative to, rather than an uncritical affirmation of, the way things already are.

The church of Jesus Christ should see its countercultural identity not as a liability, but as an asset. We should embrace our abnormal, alien status—not for the sake of being weird, but for the sake of the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brett McCracken is a film critic for Christianity Today and the author of *Gray Matters: Navigating the Space Between Legalism and Liberty* and *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*. You can follow him on Twitter at @brettmccracken.

Understanding Our True Citizenship



Sam Emadi

Scripture describes conversion as turning away from sin and turning to God. Paul summarizes conversion in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 as “turn[ing] from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9). Scripture also describes these two facets of conversion, turning from idols and embracing God, as repentance and faith. As a result of our conversion we are justified, reconciled to God, forgiven of sin, and made sons and daughters of God.

But in addition to these individual elements of conversion, we’re also made part of a kingdom and joined to a people that will endure beyond any nation or government.

CONVERSION: BECOMING PART OF GOD’S KINGDOM

According to Scripture, our conversion isn’t an isolated, private act. Conversion involves a change of citizenship from one kingdom to another. This fact doesn’t negate the individual elements of conversion. *I repent of my sin. I trust in God’s promise that*

Christ will be *my* righteousness. *I* bow *my* knee to king Jesus. But these personal elements of conversion irrevocably lead to being made part of a kingdom of people who have done the same thing. This is why Paul describes conversion as being “transferred” from one kingdom to another: “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13–14). Or, as Peter explains, receiving God’s mercy makes us part of the people of God (1 Pet 2:10).

Conversion, then, may give us a personal relationship with God, but it doesn’t give us a private one.

One of the primary reasons we don’t more frequently think of our conversion and discipleship in these political terms is because we fail to see our Christian life as part of God’s kingdom, a body politic of eternal significance.

The marble halls of the Supreme Court and the dome of the US Capitol suggest a political significance far greater than our church building’s yellowing aluminum siding. Our local county buildings seem far more important than the elementary school gymnasium we rent for Sunday worship.

But Scripture suggests that things aren’t always as they seem. The kingdom of God often looks insignificant in the world’s eyes—like a baby born in a manger, like a Jewish carpenter nailed to a Roman cross. But behind these displays of weakness is the power of God. As John teaches, Jesus’ moment of being “lifted up” on the cross (Jn 3:14; 8:28; 12:32) doubles as his exaltation. On the cross, Christ glorifies himself as king.

Commenting on this fact, Jeremy Treat has noted, “The cross becomes not only the center of redemptive history, but the fulcrum on which the logic of the world is turned upside down. Shame is transformed into glory, humiliation is exaltation, foolishness is wisdom, and the cross is the throne from which Christ rules the world” (160).

The very fact that God's kingdom is ushered in by the death of the king shows that while we await Christ's return, his kingdom will bear the marks of his cross. God's kingdom advances not through great displays of power but by the foolishness of preaching a crucified king (1 Cor 1:18; 2:1–5). God's people are known for their weakness and folly, not their prestige and power (1 Cor 1:26–27). Their lives are characterized by unswerving allegiance to the king, denying any desire that doesn't conform to his will and daily taking up their cross as they seek to love others as he loved them (Lk 9:23). Moreover, they encourage others to do the same (Matt 28:18–20). In this age, the kingdom of God is anything but glamorous. Again, as Treat notes, before Christ returns “the kingdom of God is hidden beneath the cross” (230).

Prior to conversion, we see God's kingdom according to the eyes of the flesh: weak, foolish, and inconsequential. But after conversion we see with new eyes. We look at the cross and see a king. We look at his “weak and foolish” people and see our brothers and sisters. We hear the foolishness of preaching and see the wisdom of God.

A KINGDOM OF FAITH AND REPENTANCE

Therefore, as citizens of Christ's heavenly kingdom, we bear responsibilities to that kingdom. The question is how do we live out our responsibilities to a *heavenly* kingdom while on *earth*? How do we live for a future kingdom in the present?

We do so by living out our citizenship in kingdom embassies—local churches. Our local churches are outcroppings of the future kingdom, a place where God's people will be known by name.

In local churches, converted men and women manifest God's righteous rule and true political righteousness. Each kingdom citizen shares the same story: they don't deserve to be there. As a

result, these citizens don't strive for self-importance or power but to "love one another with brotherly affection . . . [to] outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom 12:10).

Conversion roots our lives in a community characterized by repentance and faith. Because we've repented of our sin, we forgive those who sin against us (Eph 4:32). Because we've come into God's kingdom by faith, we don't use our deeds, status, ideology, or race to build barriers or as identity markers (Rom 3:27). Because we've recognized our greatest problem was that we were held captive in Satan's kingdom, we proclaim the liberating word of the king to those still under bondage (Matt 28:18–20; 1 Pet 1:23).

For those with eyes of faith, we see humanity's true political hope each Sunday morning as we sing, read Scripture, and listen to the preaching of God's Word with those who have traded in their worldly ambitions for a cross. Each member comes on equal footing, confessing their sin and proclaiming their need of a Savior. In Christ's kingdom, the noble and powerful are humbled because Christ died for their sins. In Christ's kingdom, the weakest and least powerful are welcomed and affirmed because Christ died for their sins and has seated them with him in glory. Our citizenship isn't rooted in anything in us; it's purely by the grace of God who forgave our sins and transferred us from Satan's kingdom to his own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samuel Emadi is a member of Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky and a PhD candidate in biblical studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He also serves as the director of theological research for the president of the Southern Seminary. You can find him on Twitter at @scemadi.

Churches Should Say Neither Too Little Nor Too Much



Matthew Arbo

Prophecy can be perilous. Take the example from Ezekiel 13. God’s Word comes to Ezekiel to prophesy *against* the prophets of Israel: “Woe to the foolish prophets, says the Lord God, who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!” (13:3). These false prophets say “Declares the Lord” when the Lord has not in fact addressed them (13:6). God is against those with “false visions and lying divinations” (13:8). Israel’s prophets say “peace, peace” when there is no peace (13:10) and thus incur God’s judgment. Ezekiel is in this instance a true prophet addressing false prophets—and what he’s doing is risky.

I once heard a wise, older teacher once remark that the answer to the question “where do the prophets come from?” is simple: God raised them up! That’s exactly what you’ll notice when you examine the lives of the prophets closely. They come suddenly out

of nowhere and arise in God's power. Conferral of the prophetic office is entirely God's prerogative. No one gets the option to self-identify because God alone raises them up.

AN OFFICE REINTERPRETED

But with Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, the prophetic office has been reinterpreted, as the author of Hebrews is prompt to point out: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he created the world" (Heb. 1:1). Jesus is God's Word made flesh. He *is* God's revelation. He *is* the Prophet whom the other prophets foretold.

In the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God's people are reconstituted on entirely new terms. Jesus' disciples receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them (Acts 1:8). No longer bound to the law, they're free in the Holy Spirit. They are Christ's body on earth. They have a mission. They have a way to live—walking in the Spirit—and a message to preach—"repent and believe the gospel!"

PROPHECY TODAY?

Some members of Christ's body may receive the gift of prophecy. It's a distinct gift of the Holy Spirit for an individual. Paul and Peter have a great deal to say about exercising this gift, which has to do with disclosing what God has revealed. That's why Ezekiel, for example, begins each prophetic utterance with "thus saith the Lord."

This individual gifting is expressible only within the church, however, which itself also bears a responsibility for prophetic ministry. In fact, the whole community of faith is given a prophetic task. The question at hand is what this task is supposed to look

like, and how exactly it differs from the gift of prophecy to the individual Christian. Let's take these in turn.

The church is a prophetic community because it is Christ's body on earth.

Those who carry their cross with Jesus Christ are to speak up about the meaning and significance and glory of Christ's cross. Witness-bearing is by nature inescapably prophetic, for it tells of God's power and authority above and against worldly principalities and powers. The church—as a people called out of the world, as a people knit together in God's sanctifying love, as members of Christ's holy body—is a living testimony of Jesus' salvation and rule, and is meant to witness to this salvation and rule in every facet of its life.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has said, memorably, that the church doesn't *have* a social ethic, it *is* a social ethic. What he means is that the church in its very manner of living *is* a normative standard, *is* a community of love, *is* a chorus of praise for the God who saves. The church's life should reflect the character of Christ, its head. It should be distinguishable from the world.

The church is a prophetic community that seeks to do and proclaim the will of God.

Keeping God's will is of utmost importance to the church. Why? Because his will is liberating. As such, the church always longs to do God's will and to make known that will for humanity in general. The life and message of the church should point the world to the one whose will is perfect.

The church is a prophetic community that says neither too much nor too little.

God's people say only what God has given them to say in his Word. God's Word, and what accords with God's Word, is what's

sayable. The church therefore says nothing *less* and nothing *more* than God's Word.

This means, for example, that when some matter of public concern is raised in our community—like the official apprehension of undocumented immigrants in our neighborhoods—the church can say something about what God has said about his heart for the sojourner (Lev. 19, or even about the importance of God's people to be instruments of peace in their communities (Rom. 12). But the church does *not* seek to offer detailed policy proposals for authorities to implement. In doing so, it says neither too little—as in saying nothing at all in the event of a neighbor's adversity—nor does it say too much—as in specifying all the ways the state should or shouldn't act.

The church must always bear witness to the risen Christ. That is its purpose as a set-apart people. In every manner of living and speaking, the church's prophetic testimony is of the God who saves. It prophesies of the one to whom all prophecy points. This isn't an easy, comfortable, or convenient ministry. It simply tells the truth about what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do. Or, to put in the language of our heritage: Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again!

Prophecy—*true* prophecy—can be perilous because it's full of risks. You'll notice that the prophets of the Old and New Testaments aren't wildly popular and don't enjoy long life expectancies. What they say is discomfiting to the powers that be. Likewise, the prophetic nature of the church is to live and speak as a people unembarrassed by the power of the gospel. The church points, like John the Baptist at the shores of the Jordan, to the one who takes away the sins of the world and, also like John, is willing to die to do so.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Arbo is assistant professor of theological studies and director of the center for faith and public life at Oklahoma Baptist University. He's the author of *Political Vanity: Adam Ferguson on the Moral Tensions of Early Capitalism* (Fortress, 2014). You can follow him on Twitter.

How the State Serves Both Salvation *and* Religious Freedom



Jonathan Leeman

Don't put too much hope in government. But don't give up on it either. Churches need good governments. In fact, God gave the world governments so that churches can do their work in peace. The government's work is a prerequisite to the mission of the church and salvation, just as learning to read is a prerequisite to reading the Bible.

A culture and its political institutions might turn against Christianity, but Christians should strive to make an impact as long as they have opportunity. It can get worse. Just ask the Christians in China or Iran.

A STAGE FOR REDEMPTION

Think back to the Bible's first chapters. After the flood, God gives Noah the same commission he gave to Adam ("be fruitful and

multiply”), only this time God provides a charter for government: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen. 9:6).

The immediate purpose of Genesis 9:5–6 is to render judgment and keep the Cains from killing the Abels, just as the immediate purposes of highway guardrails is to keep cars on the road.

But the ultimate purpose of government is to provide a platform for God’s plan of redemption, just as the ultimate purposes of those guardrails is to help cars get from city A to city B.

Genesis 9 comes before Genesis 12 and the call of Abraham for a reason. Government provides a stage on which God’s redemptive drama can play out.

Paul, therefore, observes that God determines the borders of nations and the dates of their duration so that people might seek Him (Acts 17:26–27). People need to be able to walk to church without getting mauled by marauders. They cannot get saved if they are dead. The work of government, in short, provides a platform for the work of the saints.

A good government builds the streets so that you can drive to church; protects the womb so that you can live and hear the gospel; insists on fair-lending and housing practices so that you can own a home and offer hospitality to non-Christians; provides a safety net particularly for those whose families and communities and schools that have failed them so that they can become pastors and missionaries; protects marriage and the family so that husbands and wives can model Christ’s love for the church; polices the streets so that you are free to assemble as churches unmolested and to make an honest living so that you can give money to the work of God.

Whether or not you agree with each of those examples, you get the point. It builds a platform for life; it doesn’t tell us how to live a life.

A PROTECTOR OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

At the same time, the state exists to protect religious freedom, and not just the Christian's freedom. Notice the reckoning in Genesis 9:6 requires parity: life for life. It's not "life for stealing a horse" or "life for false worship."

Notice also what God does not do here: he does *not* authorize us to prosecute crimes against God. We have no authority to criminalize blasphemy or false worship, at least not until harm comes to a human being. How do we measure out a crime against God? And how do we recompense God. What we have here is the beginning of a doctrine of religious tolerance. You and I simply have no authority from God to stop false worship. And nothing else in the Bible gives us such authority.

Now, if your religion begins to harm others, for instance, if you withhold medical treatment from your children, I believe God gives us the authority to intervene right here in Genesis 9:5-6. Religious liberty is not unlimited.

Yet putting all this together we can say that state's authority is quite limited, too. It doesn't pronounce on right doctrine, separate true religion from false, or declare who God's people are. It's limited to platform building. It protects life.

TWO KINDS OF GOVERNMENTS

Two basic kinds of governments, then, show up in the Bible: those that shelter God's people, and those that destroy them. Abimelech sheltered; Pharaoh destroyed. The Assyrians destroyed; the Babylonians and Persians, ultimately, sheltered. Pilate destroyed; Festus sheltered. And depending on how you read Revelation, the history of government will culminate in a beastly slaughter of saintly blood.

Romans 13 calls governments servants; Psalm 2 calls them imposters. Most governments contain both. But some are better than others.

BAD GOVERNMENTS

Yes, Jesus will build His church. No, the worst governments cannot stop the Holy Spirit. Yes, God often moves underground, undisclosed to governments.

But bad governments, from a human standpoint, really do make the church's work difficult. The slaughter, evacuation, and near-extinction of Christians in portions of Iraq and Syria today testifies to this fact, as did the Muslim occupation of North Africa in the latter centuries of the first millennium.

In *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Samuel Hugh Moffett observes:

Sharp persecution breaks off only the tips of the branches; it produces martyrs and the tree still grows. Neverending social and political repression ... starves the roots; it stifles evangelism and the church declines. Such was the history of the church in Asia under Islam, until ... Tamerlane swept the continent with the persecution to end all persecutions, the wholesale massacres that gave him the name of "the exterminator" and gave Asian Christianity what appeared to be its final, fatal blow.

By the same token, Christians should be concerned about those in European governments who want to classify belief in God as a mental illness, or to criminalize proselytizing Muslims, or to ban homeschooling because it allows children to be indoctrinated. Christians in America, too, should take incursions against religious liberty seriously.

WHAT NOW?

Four lessons follow:

1. Pray. Paul urges us to pray for kings and all in high positions so that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives. "This is good"

and “pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:3–4). We pray for our government so that the saints might live peaceful lives and people will get saved.

2. Engage. We render to Caesar what is Caesar’s by paying taxes, yes, but in a democratic context, we also do this by voting, lobbying, lawyering, or running for office. Even in an empire, Paul, for the sake of the gospel, pulled the political levers he had. He invoked his citizenship and appealed to Caesar. Steward opportunities while you have them. Vote for the candidate or the law which possesses a limited but clear view of what the government has been authorized and ordered by God to do: to exercise judgment and establish justice; to build platforms of peace, order, and flourishing; to make sure people are free and not hindered from knowing God and being redeemed.
3. Evangelize. Moffett observes that what finally killed the advance of Christianity across Asia “was not the persecution of a Tamerlane, though the permanent effects of that ravaging destruction still linger. More crippling than any persecution was the church’s own long line of decisions ... to compromise evangelistic and missionary priorities for the sake of survival.”
4. Trust. Jesus will win. That is our only source of hope for tomorrow and strength for today.

Finally, let me offer thanks to the Christians who work in government, whether politicians or police men. It might feel futile at times, but you’re building a stage for the drama of redemption.

EDITOR'S NOTE

A version of this article was originally published in *Tabletalk Magazine* as “How the State Serves Salvation,” June 1, 2015. Reprinted by permission from Ligonier.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Leeman is the Editorial Director of 9Marks, and an elder at Cheverly Baptist Church in Cheverly, Maryland. You can find him on Twitter at @JonathanDLeeman.

How can we work toward greater ethnic unity in our churches?

A Symposium



BY PHILLIP HOLMES

Christians yearn for ethnic unity in our churches. But biblical unity is hindered by sin. Sin manifests itself in divisions and barriers across ethnic lines, creating a culture of anger, sadness, and confusion. These divisions and their fruits are problematic because they're antithetical to the gospel. Over years of wrestling with these things myself, I've gained clarity that I think will help us experience the progress we desire.

1. TEACH A ROBUST THEOLOGY OF LOVE.

Love is our foundation for unity and what binds believers together in perfect harmony (Col. 3:14). Jesus' love for us forms the common bond between us, moving us to love one another (Col. 2:2). Ethnic division is rooted in a failure to understand biblical love, recognize its implications, and live them out faithfully.

2. STUDY THE HISTORY OF RACISM.

One of the greatest threats to unity across ethnic lines is fake history. Christians who are serious about pursuing harmony must diligently study history from credible sources. Love calls us to re-

joy in the whole truth, not just narratives that protect our interest (1 Corinthians 13:6).

3. BUILD GENUINE RELATIONSHIPS.

Relationships across ethnic lines are crucial, and we should enter them with a desire to know and be known. We need relationships rooted in a longing to promote one another's joy, forsaking any action that could cause harm. We must put each other's wellbeing before our own. The fruits of the Spirit characterize these relationships, while arrogance, resentment, and envy are their adversaries.

Remember, ethnic harmony is a by-product of God's truth lived out. It's not the goal. Failure to live in harmony is a failure to proclaim God's truth to the world. But our unity is evidence of our union with Christ, and it declares the power of the gospel to our divided nation.



BY PETER Y. LEE

How can we work toward greater ethnic unity in our churches? What a great question! As an Asian Christian, it's one I've thought about a great deal. My immediate thought is this: treat us as people, not percentages. Many church leaders want to have their local congregations reflect the ethnic demographic of their respective communities. When this is the goal, it's easy to value the importance of a visitor/member based upon their ethnicity, not on the fact that they're a Christian whose been united to Christ by faith or, if they're a non-Christian, a sinner in need of God's grace. What unites us is not ethnicity, but our faith in Christ. Regardless of a person's ethnic heritage, we share a common love for Jesus.

When I'm around fellow academics who wrestle with texts of Scripture, I'm part of a band of brothers. I feel the same sense of unity when I'm with fellow pastors who strive to preach the gospel. However, when the subject shifts to ethnic diversity and the need for multi-ethnic churches, all of a sudden, all eyes turn toward me. The reason why is clear—as an Asian, I offer that diversity. Earlier, I was part of a group that loved to preach Christ and theology, but all of a sudden, I'm being told that I'm a “minority.” Before, I was one with fellow believers. Now I'm being told that I'm different.

What happened? The times I feel most marginalized and isolated in the church are when this subject of multi-ethnicity comes up. I've fought to maintain my identity in Christ, so help me do that. Treat me as a person who's been redeemed by the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ. That's what I need to hear every day! And guess what? So do you. In Christ alone is our unity.



BY IRWIN L. INCE

The biblical and theological grounding of the imperative to work toward greater ethnic unity in our churches is the Imago Dei. God's triune nature, his unity in diversity as one who exists in mutual loving and glorifying community is instructive for how he designed humanity to image him. Christians are united to one another in love, have communion in one another's gifts and graces, and are therefore obligated to pursue their mutual edification.⁵ This is a love that overcomes division and reconciles contraries, bringing into communion those who have nothing in common except the fact that Christ gave himself for them.⁶

⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 26.

⁶ George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1960), 219.

My own research in the area of *Identity Formation in Diverse Churches* revealed three key ways to shepherd churches toward greater ethnic unity. First, churches must embrace the theology of unity in diversity as a gospel imperative. This belief cannot be seen as a tangential issue if churches are going to pursue ethnic unity. To refuse to pursue unity in diversity as a gospel imperative is to fundamentally neglect what it means for humanity to image God. When Christ came, he proclaimed far more than individual salvation. He proclaimed the coming of his kingdom. Thus, the gospel is so much more than a message of individual salvation. It must include the fullness of what it means to be made in the image of God. The finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God, is the entirety of redeemed humanity. Holding a position like this will change the character of preaching in a church, as well as the way a church lives in fellowship.

Second, church need to gain cultural awareness of their church and its members. Because cultural values lie beneath surface of the things we see, hear, and experience, they often go unaddressed. Therefore, churches need to develop an awareness of their unseen cultural values. These values include things like the understanding of time, worship music, community life, and responsibility. In religious organizations, differences in culture are often framed in absolute terms: “We’re just being biblical.” But if churches are to pursue the creation of a new “we,” where the dividing walls of hostility are broken down, they cannot afford to ignore the values that form their expression of “church.” In other words, churches need to be able to better express love cross-culturally.⁷ This is *not* to say there ought to be an “everything is up for grabs” attitude toward church practices. However, there must be a clear grasp of what’s essential and what’s preferential.

Third, churches need to find ways to affirm the full humanity—the royal dignity—of all people, especially those whom

⁷ Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World*, 125.

others are inclined to despise.⁸ To affirm the full humanity of people means to help them be situated rightly in understanding their immense value while simultaneously grasping that they are not God. The impact of racial hierarchy, privilege, and class in society has had a substantial impact on the way people interact with one another and value themselves. It cannot simply be said, “Just believe in Jesus, and those cross-racial social challenges will disappear.” You don’t overcome the dignity dynamic simply by believing in Jesus together.

In order to affirm the full humanity of all, churches should pay particular attention to two related practices: structural inclusion and the proper exercise of power. Structural inclusion is an aspect of hospitality and making room for others. People who aren’t a part of the majority pay the greatest cost to belong in an interracial organization. But their representation within the organization can be increased through structural inclusion. The same cultural values listed above can be avenues for this inclusion: music, diversity in leadership, and accommodating different attitudes and understandings of time.⁹ It is important to note that structural inclusion has to be pursued with authenticity, not as a way of creating a statistical diversity within the church.

The proper exercise of power in the church means creating an environment where people are able to flourish.¹⁰ Research shows that in interracial churches, those who wield power affirm white privilege and culture. Non-Whites bear the burden of maintaining a racially mixed worship experience.¹¹ This isn’t a result of malicious intent; it’s simply an implication of the way cultural values operate beneath the surface. Leadership has the respon-

8 Harrison, *God’s Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation*, 106.

9 Christerson, Edwards, and Emerson, *Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organizations*, 154.

10 Ibid.

11 Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*, Location 485.

sibility to exercise authority in a way that facilitates welcome and embrace. One way churches have done this in recent years is by providing forums and conferences for members to address the issues of race and injustice. The goal isn't just dialogue, but confession and repentance concerning these issues. Their experience of welcome and embrace was enhanced by the church's willingness to bring up the issue of race in a way that invited dialogue and vulnerability.

These recommendations—embracing the theology of unity in diversity as a gospel imperative, developing an ongoing awareness of the unseen cultural values operating within the church, and affirming the full humanity of members—aren't easy. I submit, however, that they are necessary if churches are going to work toward gospel health in ethnic unity.



PAUL JEON

First, wrestle with what the Bible says, both implicitly and explicitly, about the gospel and the coming together of “every tribe, tongue, and nation.” I grew up in an Asian-American church, and my first two stints as a pastor were at Asian-American churches. The more I wrestled with the message and implications of the gospel, I couldn't see myself raising my family and growing old in a church that was committed to being Asian-American. I'm not saying that every person must arrive at the same conclusion. I just felt “convicted”—I realize that word is tossed around somewhat flippantly—that I would have a hard time explaining to my children that the gospel is for “Jew and Gentile” and yet we were attending an almost exclusively Asian church.

Second, be sober about the messiness of adoption into God's family. God is bringing together people that aren't just different but broken. This means there will be many misunderstandings, hurts,

and offenses as very different people figure out what it means to be family in Christ Jesus. This is especially true as we cross boundaries of ethnicity and socio-economics. I've learned "to be cool" about potentially offensive remarks. In one instance, I spoke at a predominantly Caucasian church. Afterwards, a harmless elderly lady approached me, took my hand, and with all the sincerity she could muster said, "Your English is very good. I was so surprised and impressed." Born and raised in the States and proficient in English, Greek, Spanish, and Korean (in that order), I didn't know how to respond other than with a polite smile and a "thank you." I understand many feel that we can't be "cool" about everything. All I'm suggesting is accepting the messiness involved with the blessing and work of being a diverse family that's united in Christ.

Finally, we should form deep friendships with people of different ethnicities. Understanding, accepting, and celebrating our differences can't happen outside of deep friendships with different people. A little friendship will go a long way in this hard but necessary work of facilitating peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Phillip Holmes lives in Jackson, Mississippi, where he works in communications and marketing for Reformed Theological Seminary.

Peter Y. Lee is an Associate Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, D. C.

Irwin L. Ince is an assistant pastor at Grace DC, a family of Presbyterian churches in the DC area. He is also the Director of Grace DC's Institute of Cross-Cultural Mission.

Paul Jeon is a visiting lecturer in New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary's DC campus.

Why There's No Such Thing as African Christianity



Conrad Mbewe

Every generation has philosophical winds that blow across the landscape of a nation or even an entire continent. These winds often begin from an epicenter of suffering and bring about a different way of looking at life. Africa has had its fair share of these winds, and as a result missionary efforts here have had to deal with them. One question that combines the philosophical winds blowing in Africa with the world of missions is this: “Are we African Christians or Christians in Africa?”

What do I mean by this? When the first generation of indigenous leaders takes denominational power from Western missionaries, there tends to be an over-reaction. The leaders emphasize their ethnicity so much that someone listening to them may soon start thinking that the new agenda in the church should be to rid themselves of anything that smacks of the West. We must now be *truly* African.

This is worse when the handover of church power takes place while a country is undergoing political change from Western colonialism. The one-stringed banjo that's played over and over again is that Africans have their own way of worship and must return to it. What we have inherited is Western Christianity, and we must now get rid of it. That becomes the popular cry: "We are African Christians."

ONE FAITH, ONE CHURCH

Sadly, missiologists around the world sometimes capitulate to this mindset. They make a big issue of the ethnicity of the people to whom long-term and short-term missionaries are being sent. I wouldn't be surprised if a new course in Western Bible colleges is being added: "African Christianity—What you need to know." Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as African Christianity or Asian Christianity or Western Christianity. The Christian faith is one, and it's portrayed for us as such in the Scriptures.

One of the greatest fights waged by the apostles was to ensure that Jews and Gentiles worshipped together in the same church despite being different in many ways. They weren't willing to yield to the pressure of two divergent religious cultures that had become set in concrete. There was only one gospel, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:5–6). Therefore, there was to be only one church—the Christian church.

"For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26–28). Might I also add that, in Christ, there is neither African nor Asian nor Caucasian?

Anything that brings chasms into the body of Christ should be challenged on the basis of Scripture. We are one church.

DO ANY DIFFERENCES EXIST?

Do not get me wrong. I'm not suggesting there are *no* differences between Western and African culture. There is. However, to turn these cultural differences into war cries in the church of Christ is wrong. Remember, there were serious differences between Jewish and Gentile cultures, but you do not find that being encouraged in the New Testament church.

Instead, you find the apostles teaching the early church to consciously and lovingly work toward an all-inclusive church. One of the major cultural differences between Jews and Gentiles was their diet. Gentiles ate a wide range of food while Jews felt restricted by a conscience informed by the Old Testament . The apostles persuaded the Gentiles to lovingly restrict their public culinary habits for the sake of the church's unity:

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.... For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.... So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.... It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. (Romans 14:13–15:2)

THREE APPLICATIONS

How do we apply this to the Christian faith today, especially with respect to “African Christians or Christians in Africa”?

1. We should refuse to join those who have the agenda of making “African Christianity” the issue to fight for in the church.

Instead, we should insist on fighting for the purity of the gospel in any culture. That should be our battle cry. We should not be afraid of questioning so-called worship that is degenerating into nothing more than senseless clapping and dancing while repeating a few pet-phrases, just because it is being labeled “African worship.” Let us teach the worship of God as it is taught in the Scriptures.

2. We should major in expositional preaching in our churches. That way, we will find precious little that works toward enhancing one ethnicity against another. The bane of topical preaching has been the perennial diet served from many of our African pulpits, and the results have not been encouraging.

3. We should encourage visiting preachers from other cultures to expound the Scriptures as they do back home. Perhaps the main area they will need to be conscious of must be in the illustrations they use. Baseball and American football is as foreign to Africa as camels, lions, cheetahs, and elephants are to America!

But the difference between American and African pastors is very superficial, which has been proven by the popularity of sermons by Paul Washer, John Piper, and John MacArthur among many young people across Africa. They download their sermons in tens of thousands from the Internet—and by the look of things, they seem to understand these preachers pretty well.

CONCLUSION

Let the world wage its cultural and ethnic fights. It has no common ground. However, let them see something totally different when they come into the Christian church. Let them find a gospel that has broken down all our barriers, a gospel that causes believers to work lovingly toward mutual edification rather than to create yet another war zone in the guise of acknowledging our ethnicity, which may or may not have been previously suppressed.

Brothers and sisters, we are Christians who happen to be Africans, not Africans who happen to be Christians. Let us get the biblical emphasis right!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Conrad Mbewe is the pastor of Kabwata Baptist Church in Lusaka, Zambia.

More Christian than Black or White



Isaac Adams

I write to my white brothers who pastor churches in America. I write as a black brother, and I write with two things: 1) love for you in Christ, and 2) a sincere question:

What's more important—our Christian identity or our racial identity?

I think you'd say our Christian identity, and I praise God for that. Yet I wonder if you think that because our Christian identities matter most or because our racial identities don't matter *at all*—or at least not all that much. Maybe you'd never say that, but I fear you don't see how you may be conveying that to your congregation.

Brothers, I want to suggest that since our Christian identity matters most, our racial identity—and other peoples' racial identities—ought to matter *more*, not less. Why? Because all things exist for Christ, including our ethnic heritage; Christ is Lord over our entire selves (Col. 1:16). How can you submit to him what you don't give mind to? Further, since your Christian identity matters

most, you should lay down the status your racial identity gives you for the sake of the gospel. That's what Paul did.

Though the Jew-Gentile divide can't exactly be mapped to the Black-White divide, there were still racial dynamics and divisions amid Jews and Gentiles. Paul didn't deny or ignore those dynamics; he leaned into them. And so he became like the Gentiles. Why?

"For the sake of the gospel," Paul says, "that I may share with [the Gentiles] in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:23). And yet, Paul, the self-professed "Hebrew of Hebrews," insisted that he held his Jewish identity so loosely that he "became as a Jew" so that the gospel might spread (Phil. 3:5; 1 Cor. 9:20). Paul did not scorn his ethnicity or divorce it from his understanding of the gospel—he *leveraged* it for the purpose of advancing the gospel. For Paul, Christ was greater than any ethnic heritage. Therefore we should submit our ethnic heritage to Christ and his agenda, not because our ethnic heritages aren't good—there's so much good in them—but because they aren't God.

My white brother, how are you showing your congregation that Christ is superior to your skin color?

I'm asking you because ethnic minorities regularly do this when we attend churches where we're not in the ethnic majority. I'm asking you because I regularly hear black brothers talking about how Christ is superior to our skin color. Consider what the brothers below have said:

Your Christianity must define your racial identity without denying it.

- Tony Evans

Your life ain't wrapped up in what you drive

The clothes you wear, the job you work

The color your skin, naw you're a Christian first

- Lecrae

As much as I am an African-American, I am even more so a follower of Jesus Christ...In other words, my Jesus-ness must trump my blackness.

– Bryan Loritts

And yet, I rarely hear white brothers and sisters talking about what it would look like if they submitted their whiteness to Christ. Ethnic minorities have grappled with race in ways that white people in predominantly white congregations, communities, and networks haven't had to. The cultural preferences of white people are often free from interrogation because they're seen, and sometimes enforced, as what's normal and neutral. My white brothers, have you taken time to consider whether or not you've let, even unwittingly, your cultural preferences become theological imperatives? Let me give you an example of how this might happen.

Phrases like "I'm more Christian than black or white" are gloriously true, but they're often wielded in white culture to enable and encourage colorblindness—the theory that if we ignore race, then racial problems will eventually cease. Anyone who continues to talk about race is then labeled as someone who is un-Christ-like, divisive, and/or enamored with a social gospel.

Given how long African-Americans have been silenced and marginalized in American history, many have often felt as if they're constantly fighting to be seen as equals. Statements like "I'm more Christian than black or white," while true, sound patronizing when they aren't nuanced. In other words, because generally speaking race is a more pressing reality to blacks than whites, please recognize that it's harder to say "I'm more Christian than black" than "I'm more Christian than white." If you're going to tell ethnic minorities that "Jesus comes first," please remember that unrepentant slaveholders and segregationists said the same.

History like this reveals the sad irony about racial identity in America: African-Americans didn't ask for race to matter so much. A white brother once asked, "Why do blacks always talk

about themselves as a group instead of individuals?” He didn’t realize that blacks didn’t start that. Historically, whites were the ones so obsessed with the color and placement of black peoples. In short, they told blacks, “Your skin color matters most.” But now, many white people blame blacks who believed what was a lie all along, a colorful fable told solely so blacks could be exploited and subjugated.

The blame often sounds like, “You always talk about race.” Or: “Jesus is more important. Can’t you just get over it?” This reflects how many American Christians largely have two speeds when dealing with an issue: something is either completely important, or it’s completely unimportant. Color used to mean *everything*, but now folks want it to mean nothing. Many whites now want to erase color without dealing with the calamities that come from past generations *insisting* upon it. But there can be no reconciliation without a reckoning.

I’ve written this, brothers, to ask you to reckon with the fact that you are white, and to consider how that factors into how you see the world, how you think others see the world, and how you treat others, including the people under your care.

I’m asking you to reckon with the fact that how tightly you cling to your whiteness matters to Christ. How much you submit your whiteness to Christ matters to Christ, and it matters to the cause of bringing others into the blessings of the gospel. But how can you submit something to Christ if you don’t believe it matters that much? If you don’t believe it even exists? How can you lay down the status your ethnicity affords you if you refuse to see what that status means?

White pastor, I fear you might think that submitting your whiteness to Christ ought to result in deeper racial apathy. You don’t think this due to your conscious, deeply-rooted racist spirit. Instead, the thought comes from ignorance—from not knowing what you don’t know.

In other words, brother, perhaps you just haven't thought about race that much. Consider this a gentle invitation to do so because submitting your whiteness to Christ ought to result in deeper racial awareness, not apathy. It ought to result in eagerness to honor the good ways God has made us different. It ought to result in zeal to lay down the status and comforts your ethnicity gives you for the sake of the gospel.

What might this zeal look like? An exhaustive list is impossible, but this is 9Marks so here are nine suggestions in no particular order.

1. Calling out ethnocentric sin (Gal. 2:11–14). Consider how Paul rebuked Peter for pulling back from the Gentiles. He says Peter's behavior is "out of step with the gospel." Race matters are gospel issues, and they're gospel issues because God says so. If we treat our ethnicities and the cultural aspects of them as the center of the universe, we are sure to err. That's what happened with the Jews. They were upholding circumcision as necessary for salvation, but it wasn't, and Paul made that crystal clear. Paul could've cozily sat back in the status that being Jewish afforded him, but he chose Christ over ethnic comforts.

How are you making that choice? Are there ways in which folks in your congregation hold up whiteness, or parts of it, as necessary for membership? Or at least for being a "mature" Christian? Are folks in your congregation relegating other members to second-class status because they don't meet a certain cultural expression? Call that out, brothers. I fear many white pastors are concerned with simply not being racist, instead of being concerned with being a positive advocate for minorities—one who defends them as they would their own family.

2. Confessing ethnocentric sin. In that same vein, brothers, look into your own life, and your congregation's history, to see if *you* are holding up whiteness, or parts of it, as necessary for entrance into your church. Bring that to God, who is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

And we should bring that to God publicly. If we don't, we're unwittingly teaching our people that they don't need to bring their racism to God, which is allowing them to potentially stay in error. Further, we're teaching them that God isn't concerned with these matters, or at least hasn't provided the means to deal with them. Hence the thought, "Race matters are social gospel matters!" But the gospel is powerful enough to deal with them. We have all we need for life and godliness. So confess ethnocentric sin, brothers, and do so publicly.

3. Fellowship widely and letting your people see it. When Peter retreated from the Gentiles, he retreated from fellowship. He didn't want to be seen eating with them. You could imagine him saying, "I'm more Christian than I am Jewish!" But if you looked at his life, the opposite seemed to be true.

Brothers, do you have a diverse elder board? Who leads the service on Sundays and participates up front? Is it only people who look a certain way? And even if you don't have a diverse congregation, do you have wide fellowship with those who don't look like you? Do you go to conferences where you're in the ethnic minority? Do you have close friends who don't share your political opinions or cultural traditions? Do you have diverse men as guest preachers? Who do you quote in your sermons? If you're only quoting white people, what's that teaching your people? Have you asked multiple black people what their experience in your church is like, and have you believed them?

Have you asked multiple Asian people what their experience in your church is like, and have you believed them?

If you look at Acts 6, you can see ethnic conflict. We can learn from what the apostles did there to address it.

4. They **heard** the voice of ethnic minorities. They didn't deny the complaint that was brought to them or ask for them to prove it. They heard their people, and they believed them.
5. Next, they **gave** a voice to ethnic minorities. The deacons that were chosen were primarily Greeks, who were the minorities feeling the sting of the unfair food distribution. The apostles gave minorities a seat at the table—authority to make decisions and address divisions. The apostles didn't run from these matters, nor let it distract them from teaching and prayer. They realized that the spread of the gospel and the preservation of the unity it brings is a multi-ethnic team sport. Why not listen to this talk by Thabiti with your staff and discuss it?
6. **They thought of a solution.** White pastors, please notice that the apostles thought of a solution (deacons). They didn't just ask minorities what they could do to fix it. While it can show humility to ask that, it can also be a way to escape having to face these challenges with critical thinking. Asking "How can I *fix* this?" can show a mindset that thinks racial reconciliation is an event, instead of a lifestyle. If Christ matters most to you, you won't put the burden of solutions solely on minorities' backs.
7. Leaving Acts 6, I want to highlight that Paul didn't scorn his Jewish culture or forget it, **but he did know it.** Bro-

ther pastor, have you taken time to consider what it means to be white? What does it mean to be in the racial majority? Have you read a book like *White Awake*? I make this point because you can't sacrifice the status your ethnicity affords you if you don't know what that status or ethnicity is. Again, we can't submit a part of ourselves to Christ if we don't consider it to be a part of ourselves.

Brothers, our congregations need to be taught on these matters. Did Paul even understand "race" in the same ways we do? Would he have even separated religious and racial identities as we might? These are questions that require careful, biblical study, and they matter for our context today.

8. Going off of that suggestion: **read with your elders.** I'll never forget when Mark Dever had our predominantly white elder board read *Divided by Faith* and talk, pray, and lament about it together. If people don't see that these matters are a concern to you, brother, then why would you expect it to be a concern for them? If you don't talk about these matters, you're conveying that they're a non-issue.

9. Lastly, **pray about this.** My goodness was Alistair Begg correct when he said, "Satan has scored a great victory in getting sincere believers to waver in their convictions that prayer is both necessary and powerful." Brothers, pray:
 - o That God would help you see the status your ethnicity affords you, and that he would show you how to sacrifice that status for the good of others and the cause of Christ.
 - o That God would give you wisdom in how to model to your congregation the fact that Christ is superior to skin color. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask..."
 - o That God would expose any cultural preferences that you've unwittingly baptized into theological imperatives.

Brothers, I praise God for the truth that our unity runs deeper than our genes. If the most important thing about me is skin color, then we cannot be united at the deepest level, and therefore my allegiance is most to my “kinsmen according to the flesh.” But if the most important thing about us is available to all who would repent and believe, if the dividing wall has been torn down, then we have the opportunity to share our deepest allegiances with both each other and our Lord—despite what the world says. We have an opportunity to know Christ together, and to see him in one another.

And finally, you have the opportunity to examine yourself and your ethnicity and better live as if it’s true: You are more Christian that you are white.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isaac Adams, a member of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, works on staff helping support the efforts of CROSS, Together for the Gospel, and The Front Porch. You can find him on Twitter at @isickadams.

More Christian Than Democrat or Republican



Bruce Ashford

Given the increased polarization of American politics and public life, the question is frequently raised as to whether Christians should identify themselves with either major political party or—by association—the political ideologies undergirding them. I answer that it is permissible and often wise to participate in party politics, but we must be circumspect in doing so, making clear that our allegiance to political parties is tentative in light of our allegiance to Christ. We should never allow our witness to be undermined by inordinate allegiance to a political party or inappropriate forms of activism on behalf of that party’s agenda.

In order to make the case for this view, we must discuss the proper relationship between both religion and politics and church and state, before going on to discuss the legitimacy of affiliating with America’s major political parties and ideologies.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

“Never discuss religion or politics with those who hold opinions opposite to yours, wrote Thomas Haliburton in 1840. “They are subjects that heat in handling, until they burn your fingers.” Haliburton, a Canadian politician and judge, expresses the view of many modern Westerners: we shouldn’t talk about religion and politics in polite company, especially if the two subjects are joined together and even more so if the people in the room don’t agree. A similar sentiment is that religions shouldn’t be brought into the public square at all, especially not into politics.

This common wisdom is well-intentioned but wrong, unhelpful, and, ultimately, impossible to put into practice. There are at least two reasons why Christians shouldn’t reduce Christianity to the private realm, or separate it entirely from politics.

First, Scripture teaches that human beings are deeply and inescapably religious, and that “religion” cannot be defined restrictively as “the worship of a supernatural deity” (Rom 1:25). Although true religion necessarily involves the worship of a supernatural deity—the Triune God—“religion” in the broad sense is humanity’s inexorable tendency to ascribe ultimacy to Someone or Something. That Someone or Something sits on the throne of a person’s heart, commanding his loyalties and shaping his life. This object of worship might be the Triune God or the Allah of Muhammad. Alternatively, it might be sex, money, power, or success. Either way, we all serve functional gods and our absolutization of them is religious in nature.

Second, Scripture makes it clear that we cannot separate our private self from our public self. If religion were merely the mental and mystical acknowledgement of a supernatural deity, then we could more easily relegate that belief to the confines of our private lives and to certain religious ceremonies. But a person’s true religion cannot be confined.

Indeed, more than 800 times, the Bible locates religion in a person's heart. The Bible defines the heart as the unifying center of a person's entire existence, the central organizer of his feeling, thinking, willing, and acting. Thus, the poignancy of the divine command, "My son, give me thy heart!" (Prov 23:26). As the central organizer of our affections, thoughts, volitions, and actions, a person's "private" religion will inevitably radiate outward into his politics and public life. We cannot disintegrate the person by separating religion from politics.

CHURCH AND STATE

Even though religion and politics should not and cannot be separated, church and state can and should maintain an appropriate separation. As Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and others have argued, God's normative order for the world involves different "kinds" of culture, with each having its own reasons for being and corresponding limits of jurisdiction. Or, to use a spatial analogy, God's world is organized into different cultural "spheres"—such as family, church, art, education, or politics—each of which has its own center (reason for being) and circumference (limits to its jurisdiction).

One might say each sphere has its own calling and corresponding expertise, and should not transgress its boundaries by attempting to fulfill another sphere's calling. The differentiation of spheres thus serves as a *de facto* system of checks and balances, not at the political level by dispersing governmental authority but at the deeper, ontological level by dispersing cultural authority.

In this conception, the church exists as both an institution and an organism, and its relation to politics is differentiated accordingly. As an institution, the church is political in a circumscribed but profound manner: it gathers weekly around

the Word and the Table to declare that Jesus is Lord and, by implication, Caesar is not. It continually renews and redefines a church member's true political identity—as an ambassador for Christ the King—through Scripture reading, preaching, teaching, Table fellowship, prayer, song, discipline, and other biblically delineated elements of corporate worship. But the church does *not* gather to seek political power, exert influence on political parties, or make public policy pronouncements because it is neither called nor competent to do so.

The church is also an organism, a body of covenanted people whose members remain organically related to one another and to Christ, and who scatter throughout society and culture during the week. While the institutional church may have *indirect* influence on politics and the public square by shaping its members' true political identity as ambassadors of Christ, the organic church—the covenanted members of the church—may exercise *direct* influence in politics and the public square when opportunity arises and expertise allows.

DEMOCRAT AND REPUBLICAN

Therefore, unless a person removes himself from public life *en toto*, he will necessarily be *religiously involved* in both politics and public life.¹² The question remains, however, as to whether a Christian American should become involved in *party* politics. America's major political parties are populated by a mixture of believers and unbelievers and characterized internally by loosely affiliated and ever-shifting coalitions of competing interest groups and factions. In other words, affiliation with any major political party necessarily involves association with ideologies that are to some extent antithetical to Christianity.

¹² In its broadest sense, politics is the art and science of persuading other citizens and political leaders about matters of public interest, and in that sense, a person is engaging in politics not only when voting or engaging in activism but also when discussion social, ethical, and political matters in a coffee shop or on Facebook.

Accordingly, we should undertake an “archaeological dig” in which we seek to unearth the idols that shape various political ideologies. This type of assessment recognizes that every human political program will be affected to some extent by human sin and idolatry. Just as individual persons have “ultimate commitments,” so do political ideologies; to the extent that an ideology elevates some aspect of God’s creation to a level of ultimacy, it will be bad for individuals, bad for society, bad for culture, and bad for politics.

On the Right, social conservatism tends to idolize tradition and, in so doing, sometimes refuses to recognize certain aspects of our American heritage as evil. Classical liberals and libertarians tend to enthrone the individual and the individual’s liberty, so that all social institutions derive from the individual and are subject to his or her whims and desires. Nationalism tends to give divine status to a nation-state or to an ethnic community within the state and, in so doing, sometimes perpetrates injustice toward those who are not a part of the “in” group. Likewise, on the Left, progressivism ironically defies progress. Socialism idolizes common ownership or material equality. Even democracy, which is a good form of government, can lapse into idolatry if the people conflate their voice (*vox populi*) with the voice of God (*vox Dei*).

It’s worth keeping in mind that the worst idols come from the best material. Thus, each political ideology begins by seeing especially clearly the beauty of one aspect of God’s creation. But ideologies never rest by pointing out something true; instead, they assert that this partial truth is the *entire* truth, and therefore distort what they value by giving it an ultimacy it doesn’t deserve. This distortion has negative political consequences.

In combination with this 30,000-foot-level evaluation of political ideologies, we must also assess specific planks and policy positions taken by a particular party, asking whether or not we agree with the policy at hand, whether we can draw a direct line from Scripture

to the policy, and the level of certainty we should have about the policy, especially as it relates to our Christian faith.

The great problem with evaluative projects, of course, is that we are keen to recognize the problems inherent in *other* people's politics, but not in our own. We're quick to spot the idolatry in socialism or progressivism, for example, but not in our own preferred branch of conservatism. But as Christians, we must have the humility to recognize that we all are "prone to wander," and that our political views may be more errant than we realize.

Finally, we must be determined to foster the sort of "table fellowship" within our churches that emphasizes our Christian unity even in the midst of our political differences, that recognizes how political parties are useful instruments but awful identities. We are so much more "Christians" than we are "Republicans" or "Democrats," and our Christian hope for politics is the soon return of Christ the King who will install a one-world government and a one-party system in which justice rolls down like the waters (Amos 5:24).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bruce Ashford serves as provost and professor of theology and culture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

More Christian Than American



J.D. Greear

The point of this article is simple: We serve America best when we don't serve her first.

This is a crucial point to make, especially for us as Christians. After all, we live in peculiar political times. Take a quick glance at the news—or the Wild West of social media that we've created for ourselves—and you may get the idea that what matters more than anything is declaring yourself to be on the correct side of the political issue *du jour*. From many quarters, Christians are being called to speak to our nation's cultural and political problems with all of the urgency and fire we can muster.

I'm a little torn about this situation. On one hand, I'm always glad to hear Christians encourage each other to apply the gospel to public life. As Abraham Kuyper famously said, there is not one square inch of the entire cosmos over which Jesus does not emphatically declare, "Mine!" Believers need to learn to think biblically about justice, taxation policy, religious liberty, family structure, prison reform, healthcare, national security,

immigration, and everything in between. Christians can and should bring the salt and light of God's *shalom* into every sphere of society.

On the other hand, our political efforts can fall into a two-pronged error. First, we can invest too much hope in our nation, thinking that God's primary agenda on earth is to create a glorious "city on a hill." We can easily and tragically ignore the charge that Jesus gave us: to build a church that maintains a faithful presence in and witness to a fallen society, a church that the gates of hell cannot resist.

The second prong of this well-intentioned error is letting good political agendas keep us from God's primary gospel agenda. The Great Commission was not to build great nations but to *make disciples*. This doesn't mean that we, as Christians, don't also work diligently for fairness, justice, and good government; it simply means that the role of the *institutional* church is disciple-making, not nation-building. Getting the institutional church involved in the former very easily inhibits her from the latter.

Note here that I am talking about the church as an *organization*, not an *organism*. Members of the body of Christ can and should be involved at all levels of society. But the church as "organization" has a very specific, focused mission.

EXAMPLE OF JESUS

The ministry of Jesus provides us with a helpful example here. In Luke 12:13–14, a man asked Jesus to help him regain money he believed had been stolen from him by his brother. But Jesus, who cared a lot about justice, refused to adjudicate and said only, "Man, who made me a judge over you?" Now, here we have a legitimate social justice complaint: In those days, older brothers had the leverage to exploit the inheritance process. But Jesus refuses to weigh in—not because he didn't care about justi-

ce but because he knew that if he leveraged his influence to parse this particular situation he would have a line of people waiting for him to arbitrate theirs also. And that would have kept him from his *primary* agenda: seeking and saving the lost through the preaching of the gospel (Luke 19:10).

So, instead of leveraging a verdict, he preached a sermon on greed that would have addressed idolatry problems in *both* of the brothers (Luke 12:15–21). It's not that this social justice issue *wasn't* important, just that the gospel he preached was *too* important to let it be overshadowed by any secondary discussion.

We need Christian judges to help “cheated brothers” get their inheritance today. But this isn't something that Jesus, or his institutional church, should take on. We are neither called nor competent to legislate these issues, and certainly not in a way where we stake the credibility of gospel witness on them.

The same pattern runs through the lives of the apostles. Paul, for instance, spent very little time arbitrating the various social ills plaguing the Roman Empire (of which there were *many*) and focused instead on spreading the gospel and planting churches.

CONNECTING VIRTUE AND POLICY

One important caveat: There certainly are times when we have to connect virtue with actual policy, speaking out specifically to our current situation. The gospel demands, for instance, that we speak up for the vulnerable members of our society—be they homeless, impoverished, imprisoned, or unborn—when we see them exploited. But far too often, the temptation for those of us who represent the church is to connect the Christian message too tightly and dogmatically to specific policies.

Policy always looks so clear in the moment, but a little time and distance show us there's often much more to issues than we initially realized. That's fine—we will always get things wrong. But

we don't have to tie the church's credibility to those issues. The church should limit her authority to things she knows, beyond reasonable doubt, to be true—things specifically given to us in the Word of God.

Furthermore, even if we're right in our assessment of an issue, wading into political waters clouds our message. Churches have a limited bandwidth to put forward a message to their community. Talking too much on secondary things can keep people from hearing us on the primary thing. I might be wrong, for instance, about global warming, but I am *not* wrong about the gospel—and I refuse for my opinions on the former to keep people from hearing me on the latter.

When we look backward from the perspective of eternity, I have little doubt that we pastors will wish that we had spent more time teaching our communities what it looks like to be “Christian” rather than focusing our efforts on building a great “America.”

A UNITY THAT SUPERSEDES OUR DIFFERENCES

If we approached our cultural and political situation with this perspective—that we are Christians first and Americans second—we would likely see much more unity within our churches. Many Christians today, for instance, can't imagine having fellowship with anyone that doesn't align with them politically. But that attitude betrays the first importance of the gospel. Christians can (and should) charitably disagree on many issues. They should be able to have vigorous discussions on them without it affecting their unity in the church.

There are many people in our church who love Jesus more than I do, but parse certain political questions differently than me. Some disagree with me on the best posture for government to take in empowering the poor or what a reasonable national defense strategy looks like. I'm glad we still worship and pray to-

gether each weekend and that we do life together. We need to talk together about these things, learn from each other, and challenge each other. But at the end of the day, we can rejoice in a unity that goes deeper than our politics. That means we can talk about these issues civilly, humbly, and with a love for each other that always gives the benefit of the doubt.

I've often pointed out to our church that one of Jesus' disciples was "Simon the Zealot." Zealots were those Jews that thought Judaism should revolt against the oppressor, Rome. Included with Simon in that circle of 12 was "Matthew the Tax Collector," who had worked for Rome collecting taxes. Two completely different—and opposing—political strategies. I'm sure they had some incendiary political discussions by the campfires at night. Personally, I'd love to have observed Jesus' posture as he listened to them. But at the end of the day, Simon and Matthew found a unity greater in their love for Jesus than the political questions that divided them.

A CITIZENSHIP THAT CAN NEVER BE THREATENED

I'm not ashamed to admit that I love America. I love it not just because it's my homeland. I'm inspired by its ideals. I cherish its promises of freedom. I'm moved by her many stories of courage and selfless defense of the oppressed. I love the opportunities her liberties have afforded, and I'm grateful for how those liberties have allowed the church to grow and spread throughout the world like never before.

Of course, *I know we as a nation have failed—sometimes miserably and dramatically—to live up to our ideals.* We're still healing from damage caused by our horrendous sins of slavery and oppression. Our hypocrisy between what we said we believed as a nation and what we practiced is inexcusable. But I love what America has always aspired to be.

As much as I love my country, recent political events have made me realize more than ever that my true citizenship isn't here. It's in heaven. That's a citizenship I share with millions around the

world—believers in Nigeria and China and Afghanistan—that can never be threatened by what happens in the U.S.

We believers are citizens of a kingdom that can never be shaken and whose glories will never fade, and we serve a King who can never be corrupted. That reality doesn't make me one ounce less passionate about seeing change in my earthly country, but it does keep me from despair. I long for my homeland to come to God, to experience the blessings that come from walking with him. I want America to acknowledge the supremacy and worthiness of Jesus.

As a private citizen, I'm very politically active. But I know that salvation doesn't come riding in Air Force One. It came from a baby born in a manger. His symbol was not a donkey or an elephant, but a lamb—and our hope is not found in the Stars and Stripes of our flag but in the scars and stripes of our Savior.

May God give us believers the grace to love the gospel and the church more than we love our political positions, cherishing this message and this people as the last and best hope on earth. We must, now and always, be more Christian than American.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. D. Greear is the pastor of Summit Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. You can find him on Twitter at @jdgrear.

Men, Women, and the Place of True Equality



Trillia Newbell

The topic of men and women and our function in the local church is one of the leading discussions in Christian circles during the past 50 years. Unfortunately, the topic is often marred by controversy and division, and some complementarians can feel, for good or bad, put on the defensive. So we rush to explain and emphasize the differences between men and women, which often leads to more confusion, yet in the process forget to emphasize the gloriously and typically counter-culture truth of the equality of men and women.

To my fellow complementarians, then, let's not forget how poorly women have been treated throughout history. And consider how the biblical truths of equality make Christianity shine and stand out in comparison to other religions and parts of the world today where women are often treated as second-class. I wish I could say that we have gotten this right throughout history, too. We haven't always exercised our faith with the radical call to love our neighbor as we should. But by the grace of God and power of the Spirit,

we can. Churches, therefore, should be places where our differences are taught and celebrated, yes, but so should our equality. So as we continue to work out the scope and nature of our differences, let's keep celebrating and affirming our equality and unity, starting where God does, in Genesis 1.

IMAGO DEI

In the beginning, God created all of mankind in his image, male and female alike (Gen. 1:26). And we know that before the foundation of the world, God, in his goodness and kindness, had his people in mind (Eph. 1:4). It was no surprise to our omniscient Father that Adam and Eve fell and sin entered the world. He knew people wouldn't always worship and delight in Him—and knowing this, he didn't have to give us aspects of himself. But he did. God—the holy one, pure and awesome—created us to reflect aspects of his beauty and character.

Of all the creatures God made, humans are the only ones created in his very image. Among many things, this means we have dominion over the rest (1:28). This is a profound mystery—God is spirit, so we do not bear his *physical* image (see John 4:24)—and yet it's also a great privilege.

As God's image bearers, men and women are able to reflect God in our ability to create, to feel compassion, to show grace, to uphold justice, to express our love, and more. Men and women aren't monolithic in this reflection—either as individuals or as representatives of our gender—but we are equal in it. We're equal in dignity and worth, and we're also equally fallen (Rom. 3:23).

The imago dei isn't a new concept for most of us. We've heard it over and over again. We know that men and women are created equal, but different, and yet it would seem that most of our focus is on the difference. We search to know what's accepta-

ble—what men and women can do and cannot do—instead of celebrating the sameness we enjoy as image bearers. Why do we do this? Have we forgotten the reality that *all* humans at root are created the same, each with immeasurable value?

Understanding our equality as image-bearers changes everything about our human relationships. As image bearers, we should view others as God views them. So perhaps we ought to ask ourselves, do we honor the image of God in our fellow man and woman, our fellow sister and brother?

God could do anything he wanted without us, but he chose to use us. And God chose both men and women to fulfill his purposes in the world for the good of the church and for his glory. It's God's grace to us that, as the body of Christ, we can partner together to proclaim Christ. Specifically, each person in the local church plays an important role in its functioning properly. When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the gifts being utilized in the church (as we'll discuss below), he didn't distinguish between men and women.

A BODY WITH MANY PARTS

There are many of us in the church who long to have hands that can draw when perhaps God has instead given us feet that can march. We may desire to play a certain role in the church that God has ordained and equipped others for. It could be that this desire truly comes out of a love for service, or it could be an indication that selfish ambition has taken root in our hearts as we strive for our own glory.

Whatever the case, I always find Paul's writings in 1 Corinthians to be helpful when thinking through where and how God has gifted us to serve in the local church. By focusing on both this call to serve *and* the fact that God has gifted men and women, we should find a beautiful common ground as we think through our differences and our different convictions.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the church is one unit made up of many parts (1 Cor. 12:12). Though these parts represent various ethnicities, cultures, genders, and ages, they've been unified by the same Spirit (2:13). Unity is the goal, but as we see at the beginning of Corinthians, the church is divided, and some members seem to value certain gifts over others (1:10–31).

Paul uses the imagery of a physical body to provide truth and correction. The body is indeed made up of many parts, and these parts aren't all the same. Our eyes aren't like our mouths. Each has different and unique functions. The same is true for our ears and our hands. A healthy body is one where all the parts work together. But if one part is absent or not working correctly, it's difficult for the body to function as it should.

Different parts of the body aren't of lesser importance or value: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor." (12:21-23). Paul's line of thinking here seems backward in our success-hungry, name-recognition-driven society. Weakness isn't often associated with greatness. In fact, it's often considered utterly dispensable. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and his wisdom isn't our wisdom.

So often, we can look for a certain role and miss the certain *need*. In other words, there isn't a man's Bible and a woman's Bible. Although there are differences between men and women, the call to be active in using our gifts is for everyone. I imagine these aren't topics we disagree on. After all, there are few who say men and women shouldn't be engaged in service. And yet, how often do we highlight when the body is actually functioning well?

CELEBRATE AND ENJOY

I imagine that gender wars—infighting between men and women of the Christian faith—is at the top of Satan’s list of joys. As men and women, we have an equally eager enemy to be aware of and on guard against. Paul warns us in Ephesians: “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (6: 12).

It would behoove us not to forget our true enemy, to not forget our real fight that is not against flesh and blood. Satan doesn’t want the watching world to know our love for one another and therefore point to our source—Jesus (John 13:35). So, as we remember to stand firm in our faith together, we have a clear motivation to celebrate one another and our shared mission together. What a privilege it is to join together as brothers and sisters on this mission to proclaim Christ!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trillia Newbell is an author and the Director of Community Outreach for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee with her family, where they attend Redemption City Church. You can find her on Twitter at @trillia-newbell.

Just A Spoonful Of Wilberforce



Jonathan Worsley

Do you remember the words from London’s favorite nanny, “Just a spoonful of sugar”? It’s great British advice: take your medicine, and keep your sweets in moderation.

But apparently we don’t take the advice, at least the moderating-our-sweets part. The average Brit now consumes 15 spoonfuls of sugar a day. Americans consume 19. In the past, I’ve sought sweeping sugar sobriety only to cave to Cadbury’s chocolate. My three young children are worse. They’re obsessed with monosaccharide, and I find myself regularly thinking of Mary Poppins’ lyrics, with an emphasis on the one: just *one* spoonful, please!

So it is with many things in life: a little of something is great, while a lot is not so great.

Consider the way many Christians talk about William Wilberforce in particular and Christian political activism in general. Within Christian circles there are two extreme stances when it comes to both socio-political engagement and sugar: addictive

worldly indulgence *or* the stanch conviction that true believers who really love their body “don’t touch the stuff.”

SICKLY CRAVINGS?

Some have seemingly become so hooked on the sweetness of political influence that their church body has also absorbed the predominant political philosophy of the day. From my perspective in the UK, I think of Rev. Kelvin Holdsworth, who recently encouraged the Church of England to attract the LGBT community by praying that its future Supreme Head (little Prince George) would be gay.¹³

Similarly, former Liberal Democrat leader and self-professing evangelical, Tim Farron, eventually yielded to his political hunger, and stated, “I don’t believe gay sex is a sin.”¹⁴ Farron, thus, secured his constituency and won more votes for his party. Ironically, however, he resigned days later, stating that the current political climate made it impossible to be both a political leader and a committed Christian.¹⁵

SUGAR-FREE CHURCH?

On the other end of the spectrum, some Christians, who love their body (their local church body), steer clear of all engagement in civil life. Here, the American Amish and the British Brethren readily come to mind, many of whom believe that holding political office is off the menu for believers.

Such thinking is more subtly evidenced in evangelical churches that: ignore the political hot potatoes of the day, fail to equip believers for activity within the public square, and give the impression that all mature Christians move into full-time Christian ministry.

¹³ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/christians-should-pray-for-prince-george-to-be-gay-church-minister-says-a3707996.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/25/tim-farron-says-gay-sex-not-sin-admits-had-allowed-become-election>

¹⁵ <https://www.libdems.org.uk/liberal-democrat-leader-tim-farron-resigns>

SWEET WILBERFORCE

Navigating a faithful middle way is thorny. Consequently, I confess that I have previously leaned in the safer direction of a sugar-free political existence.

More recently, however, one church member pointed me toward an “inspiring” biography of William Wilberforce.¹⁶ Just weeks later, my father—who worked in local government—told me that he too was reading the sweet biography and “couldn’t put it down.” Somewhat intimidated by the 700 pages, I declined their offers to borrow the tome.

But the two conversations had piqued my interest. I started to read up on the Christian politician, who abolished the slave trade,¹⁷ and I fell in love with his unremitting prayer: “May I be the instrument of stopping such a course of wickedness.”¹⁸ I also discovered that Wilberforce was influential in countless other social reforms, including legislation that improved the lives of my Worsley ancestors in the textile mills of Lancashire. The more Wilberforce I tasted, the more delectable his faithfulness became, and the greater appetite I had for seeing Christians equipped for the increasingly difficult occupations of law, education, and politics.

However, this growing admiration for Wilberforce also led me to discover a tendency among some Christians and even parachurch organization to abandon the old principle of moderation—just *one* spoonful, please. We present Wilberforce not only as a model Christian politician, but also the model of what *every* Christian should be doing and what *every* Christian should expect in the public square. Basic Christianity becomes

¹⁶ William Hague, *William Wilberforce, The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner*

¹⁷ John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance* provides an excellent short biographical account of Wilberforce, as does Derek Bingham, *Wilberforce: The Freedom Fighter* for a younger readership

¹⁸ Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, Volume 1. p. 143

all about applying the Christian life to culture, and investing all our time time in fighting liberal ethics and conservative injustice. We teach our students that, if they believe and work hard enough, they too can change the world.

It's like the Wilberforce morality-tales are turned into a sugar high.

It makes me wonder, have some of us become dangerously addicted to the sweet social reformer? Is this really what Jesus calls all of us to do?

THREE INDICATIONS YOU'RE ON A SOCIO-POLITICAL SUGAR HIGH

While there's not time here to analyze all the potential merits and flaws of such gorging on Wilberforce, and exactly how many spoonfuls of him one should consume, I want to highlight three danger signs that I observe in some today:

1. A Failure To Honor God-given Institutions

Is Jesus Lord over every square inch of the Oval Office and 10 Downing Street? Yes. Do Jesus' words underscore that both President Trump and Prime Minister May ought to change their positions on a variety of issues? Certainly. But should their failure terminate our respect for them? No. The Bible is clear. Christians are to obey the civil government because God has established it. Its leaders are to be prayed for and obeyed.¹⁹

However disillusioned we may be with our current political climate, we're not to deride God-given authority. Indeed, Christians today who engage respectfully—either in public courtrooms or behind private computer screens—are some of the sweetest (and saltiest) people around (Matt. 5:13–16). They're the people who are best placed to deliver the glorious shock of Christ's rule and return. The present authorities of this age have no future, but they do have a legitimate present.

¹⁹ John 19:11, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-14, 1 Timothy 2:1-3

2. A Greater Hope For Cultural Change In The Public Square Than In The Local Church

I don't know how involved Wilberforce was at Holy Trinity, Clapham, whether he played the bass or was on the Welcome Team. But he certainly appeared to spend most of his waking hours addressing social issues. I don't think this was sinful given the nature of his occupation, and I'm very reluctant to start talking in quantitative terms about how Christians should spend their time.

However, I am concerned when believers start to care more about their temporal local government body, than their eternal local ecclesiastical body, and hence, more about being a cultural man-at-arms than a church member. The Christian's most compelling political witness to Christ's reign is their local church. For it's *here* that the non-Christian sees and hears of Christ's love and justice.

Moreover, when Jesus' Great Commission is correlated with cultural transformation—when the call to make disciples through a proclamation of the gospel and a baptism into the local church is misguidedly equated with Christians in civil vocations spreading a gospel culture to all creation—many energetic young believers waver in their commitment to their local church body.

3. An Expectation Of Political Victory Now

The film *Amazing Grace*²⁰ closes with Parliament giving Wilberforce a standing ovation. And as the credits roll, the bagpipe procession outside Westminster Abbey (where he is buried) confirms what we already knew: Wilberforce won.

Praise God for this sweet victory. I hope and pray that as more people (particularly legislators) are converted, we'll see increasing justice in society.

²⁰ The 2006 film on the life of William Wilberforce directed by Michael Apted

Nevertheless, Christians shouldn't presume earthly victory. Indeed, having just preached Ecclesiastes, I'm pretty convinced that we ought to expect much injustice under the sun (Eccl. 5:8).

Furthermore, we must remember that the cross of Christ hasn't yet universally eradicated all the effects of the fall. Christ certainly inaugurates an alternative polis of the justified and the just, but we, as the outpost of heaven, still live in a bitter world. Christians should expect to see the sweet kingdom of Christ's church growing (Mrk. 4:30-31) - and possibly toward the end exponential growth amidst much suffering.²¹

But we don't have any clear grounds for expecting the political realm to be progressively influenced by the Church. Our political influence will wax and wane, and as Christians in every era we're called to faithfully stand. Maybe we will see Wilberforce's sweet fruit; maybe we'll see Polycarp's sour fire.

FINDING THE BALANCE

At the end of the day, it turns out you *can* have too much of a good thing. Like sugar. Like William Wilberforce morality tales.

So tell the stories of successful Christian social advocates—absolutely. But you might also tell the “unsuccessful” stories too, and explain how so many “unsuccessful” heroes pleased God through their faithfulness.

Think of the heroes in Hebrews 11. These heroes, too, sought to “conquer kingdoms, enforce justice, obtain promises” (Heb. 11:33). But along the way, they were “stoned, were sawn in two, were killed with the sword” (v.36). How could they do it? Because their hearts were set on “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16). Though they “did not receive what was promised,” they knew God had promised something “better” (vv. 39–40).

²¹ Romans 11:25-27; Matthew 24:15-22

Praise God for the good they did here. But they did good here not by hoping in the now, but in the not-yet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Worsley is the pastor of Kew Baptist Church in the United Kingdom. You can find him on Twitter at @jiworsley.

The Dangerous Allure of Being a Cultural Warrior



Brian Davis

There is something tempting about being a cultural warrior. We jump into battle on social media, in our Sunday School lessons, occasionally in our work.

Our day seems ripe for war. We hear of wars and rumors of wars. There is no shortage of cultural landmines to step on, or ideological trip-wires to activate. Daily we're provided with new fronts for the battle. There are many thoughts to contradict and many philosophies to oppose (Col 2:8).

Yet we must be clear not only on what issues to engage, but the manner in which to engage. This is uniquely necessary for pastors, who should exemplify what faithful engagement looks like. If I read your tweets and blog posts and can't tell if you're a pastor or Rambo, something is wrong. But the lesson holds true for every Christian.

Many Christians—I assume with good intentions—take up the cultural warrior sword, a bit like Peter in Gethsemane. When their Christian principles are attacked they respond in kind, drawing their weapon and striking their opponent. I think Jesus just might shut down their reckless emotionalism like he did Peter: “Put your sword into its sheath” (John 18:11).

Others Christians oppose worldly ideologies with imprecatory pronouncements, as if they were the disciples: “And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’” They too have a word from Jesus: “But he turned and rebuked them” (Luke 9:54–55).

Cultural warriors may use the Bible, but very rarely are governed by it. They may get obvious results, but it will not be wrought by the power of God, for it will not be based on the Word of God. Therefore, this way of engaging the world will not bring glory to God.

Whether we are pastors leading a church, members posting on Facebook, or even police officers patrolling our beat, we must expose works of darkness and be lights in the world—letting our light shine before others. God has assigned us with different jobs and authorities: the pastor one thing, the police officer another, and so on. Yet no matter who we are, we’re called to engage the culture we’re in with a mindset they don’t know. After all, we have the mind of Christ. We have the Spirit of Christ. We have the living and active Word of Christ. These glorious realities should govern our engagement. Not only must we fight the battles we should, but we must fight those battles in a certain kind of way—a way that brings glory to God.

HOW TO ENGAGE

How then are we to engage the cultural battles and wars we find ourselves in? Here are some suggestions for consideration. Hope-

fully, they will move us away from the cultural-warrior face paint and toward distinctly Christian ambassadorial faithfulness.

First, we must remember that, first and foremost, we always represent another kingdom.

Some things encourage me every time I'm reminded of them, such as this truth: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

Often, I'm tempted to respond in a worldly way to what I view as worldly problems. But that's not the realm I'm called to live in. That's not the citizenship I'm to be dominated by. Rather, I'm to act and live as an ambassador of Christ's kingdom—his other-worldly kingdom. Again, that's true whether my full-time job is to make disciples or make arrests.

Second, we live and engage by faith.

Culture warriors put their hope in the transformation of this world, and so that do all they can to change this world by force. They seem to believe more will be accomplished by their arguments than by their prayers. Christians, as citizens of a nation, must also use the devices of this world. Christian parents parent. Christian lawyers make argument. Christian soldiers fight. But they do all this by faith, knowing the kingdom only advances by faith.

Make no mistake, our faith should produce works—and qualitatively "good" ones at that. There are good social causes to take up. There are good policies in government to fight for. But the Christian's good works should be completely flavored by another world.

Third, we know the real battle isn't in what we see.

Just as Jesus was sent, he has sent us. But he's not sent us to be warriors after the world's kind, but to be word-bearers after his

kind: “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3–4)

Our armory is in the throne room of God, and our power comes from on high. Our aim isn’t locally focused or even momentarily achieved, but rather anchored above in eternal glory.

For Christians, the battle isn’t won when a policy is adopted, a president is elected, or an ordinance is passed in any particular territory. Our marching orders are of a higher calling and from a higher rank. All our endeavors and undertakings, each of our personal pursuits, the whole trajectory of our dealings in this world—all of it must be tethered to our King’s edict which is exclusively found in God’s Word.

Fourth, we don’t confuse our message for God’s.

The Scriptures transform us from living subjectively into being living sacrifices, fully consecrated for his use. We can faithfully engage culture only when we depend on God’s Word for our message and our method.

People drift into becoming cultural warriors when they assume their message is the same as God’s, and therefore distance themselves from being under the entire domain of Scripture. They assume that something *they* feel strongly about is something that *God* feels strongly about. They assume *their* angle of voting is *the* Christian angle for voting. They assume *their* call to social action is *the* call to social action.

In disregarding the total authority of the Word of God, people seek to take the throne of authority themselves. As if they’ve snatched the ruling scepter from Christ, they feel free to pronounce judgment on those who disagree with them. It becomes nearly impossible to hold such people accountable to their communication or their conduct since there’s no shared standing under Scripture.

Fifth, we let the Word of God determine our method.

The Word of God must shape our methods as we engage culture. It's one thing to know the right gospel to share, but we also must also know the right demeanor of a herald: "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim. 2:24).

We must stay tethered to an "other-worldly" behavior that's above reproach and commends the gospel. For instance, we must engage others with *gentleness* and *respect*. Culture warriors have little place for gentleness and respect in advancing their agenda. Christ, on the other hand, has required gentleness and respect as among the best tones for sharing his agenda (1 Pet. 3:15).

Both method and message reveal our true devotion and commitment to Christ. We belong to Christ and live totally for him, and he has told us precisely how to live for Him in His Word.

CONCLUSION

So much of what we encounter every day seeks to make us ambassadors of earthly domains. The news, our neighborhoods, and especially our social media seek to recruit us to take up their cause and devote ourselves to them.

But in the gospel, we've been made ambassadors for Christ. His agenda is ours, and he is the one in whom we hope. Our King is in heaven, his kingdom is of heaven, and even though we live on earth, our citizenship is in heaven with him.

Our cultural engagement should always advertise our true hope. Just as we are not of this world, our hope is not of this world—nor is it dependent on this world's acceptance. Our words, actions, and aims should reflect the reality of our otherworldly hope: "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a

Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself”(Phil 3:20–21).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Davis lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Sonia, and their two sons, Spurgeon and Sibbes. He is part of the church planting team for Risen Christ Fellowship. You can find him on Twitter at @theservantfella.

Why Politics Overwhelms the Church



Russell Moore

Years ago, we knew an elderly man whose doctor pleaded with him to stop watching cable television news. The man, a church member, grappled with high blood-pressure and a host of other ills, but whatever progress he would make with his health would evaporate once he saw televised discussions of politicians and political issues about which he felt passionately. He would scream at the television, with all the fury he could muster, about what should obviously be done if “these idiots would only listen to me.”

We thought our geriatric friend’s nightly screaming matches were kind of amusing at the time. I don’t anymore, now that I am sometimes the face on the television, and sometimes, too often, I feel like screaming at the television myself. As a matter of fact, it seems as though the entire cul-

ture is that man now—yelling into the void with cheers for “our side”—whatever that is—and with denunciations of the “other side”—whoever they are.

To some degree, the passions of our politics are a good thing. After all, God cares about justice, and often the Spirit prompts the prophets to speak—with loud denunciations—of injustice in the social and civic spheres (Amos 2:1–24, to cite but one example of what could fill pages). The Spirit prompts us to groan inwardly at the wreck of creation (Rom. 8:19–23).

THE EVANGELICAL OBSESSION WITH POLITICS

Still, there seems to be something else afoot here. Politics—by which I mean partisan or ideological tribal identities, not actual statecraft—seems all-encompassing in this cultural moment, perhaps, sadly, as much or maybe even more so in the church as in the world. Within the so-called “evangelical movement,” those who deny essential matters about the definition of the gospel—such as prosperity gospel teachers—are received as fellow evangelicals provided they are aligned on values and politics.

Moreover, the outside world could probably define “evangelical” in terms of how they see it as a political movement, but one in a thousand probably couldn’t explain what evangelical Christians believe about, say, justification by faith. Maybe some of this is because the outside world idolizes politics and dismisses the gospel. But maybe a great deal of it is because we do, too.

A wise friend once told me that a surefire way to see where one’s deepest affections are is to see what most easily inflames one’s emotions. It’s here that we see a massive gap between our own cultural and subcultural foment and the emotional life of Jesus.

JESUS AS OUR EXAMPLE

Jesus cared about Caesar's coin questions (Matt. 22:21). They didn't dominate his emotional energy. Jesus feels more than free to denounce Herod as a "fox" (in context, a withering repudiation; Lk. 13:32), but he keeps right on walking toward Golgotha. Jesus is tranquil before the possibility of Pilate's judgment (Jn. 19), but anguished before the prospect of God's. Jesus is so unconcerned about being offended that he overlooks a dismissal of his Nazareth background (Jn. 1:46–51), but is angered to the point of overturning tables when the temple—the dwelling place of God—is turned into a marketplace preventing all peoples from entering to pray (Jn. 2:13–32).

Caesar never prompted Jesus to rejoice (Lk. 10:21). Pilate never prompted him to sweat blood. Why? Because he trusted a sovereign Father and saw a kingdom that would triumph over all rivals. He was tranquil before the state, and passionate about the church.

RELIGION & ITS EVER-CHANGING PRIORITIES

When a religion reflects a different set of priorities, that religion is following something or someone other than Jesus. Indeed, much of what emotionally mobilizes the twenty-first century North American church is not related to Christian life and doctrine and mission, but to "Christianity" as a set of values under siege by the dominant culture. In fact, it's difficult to keep up with even a politically-defined religion.

After all, the values one would need to affirm to be in the tribe in one year might well be deemed those that don't matter in the next year. The cultural degradations one would denounce loudly, right along with the rest of the herd, in one year would become acceptable in the next, just depending on the personalities and pet sins and injustices of one's "side" at the moment. What would

be characterized watching at the wall of righteousness in one year might well be deemed pharisaical self-righteousness in another.

Such is inevitable when Christianity is identified with a cultural system rather than with the transcendent theological claim of the multinational, multiethnic, multigenerational kingdom of God, which joins heaven to earth in the person of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:9–22).

Political ideologies are often then posed in terms of exuberant triumph (“We’re winning! We have influence!”) or in terms apocalyptic despair (“We are about to lose our entire culture!”). Both that exuberance and that despair are then used to justify all sorts of things we never imagined we would affirm, or things we never thought we would deny.

These matters seem that way because they feel much more immediate than, say, whether or not cultural Christianity or prosperity theologies can send people to hell. Of course they do. Sexual passion feels more immediate than the kingdom of God, too. That’s why we’re called to “flee youthful passions” and to submit our sexual passions to the longer-term vision of holiness and righteousness (2 Tim. 2:22).

JUDGING THE WORLD, IGNORING THE CHURCH

Not only do these temporal ideologies often seem more “real” to us than the kingdom, these ideological movements can also become a place of belonging after the eclipse of the church. The Apostle Paul tells us, right in line with Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the tares, that we do not exercise judgment over the outside world but over the boundaries of those who are called brother or sister (1 Cor. 5:9–13).

In our era, it’s easier to do the reverse. We often rail against the perceived sins of our cultural enemies, while minimizing those within the church. Even worse, we sometimes even confer Chris-

tian identity on people apart from repentance and faith, simply because they are “with us” on the issues. That’s a scandal.

Registering people to vote can seem more important to us than making sure all those on our church membership rolls are following Christ. We rarely see people excommunicated from churches for unrepentant sin, but we see people informally excommunicated for saying that all sin demands repentance, and that no one is justified before God by being “on our side.”

THE CHURCH’S BURDEN

In this era, the burden for the church is great. We must constantly catechize that the Christian gospel isn’t a means to an end of national prosperity or political influence. We must constantly work toward churches that see our identities as, first, ambassadors of the kingdom that will outlast every human state. This is especially true when many in the next generation are walking away from Christ, not because they have found his gospel tried and wanting, but because they assume that Christianity is just politics all the way down.

A church freed to seek the kingdom first wouldn’t dismiss political or social ethics. While the Bible doesn’t give us a detailed public policy outline, it does define justice. The Bible tells us what matters, and who matters. But a church that follows the Bible will not adjust what we speak to and what we keep silent about on the basis of what’s counted important or useful by some ideology or movement.

To be sure, we will find points of overlap with political movements, but never comprehensively. The questions “How can you talk about racial justice when there’s abortion?” or “How can you talk about the sanctity of unborn human life when there’s racial injustice?”, whether posed implicitly or explicitly, are the language of hacks not disciples.

We will seek to shape people's consciences on the basis of what we've learned at the Lord's Table, not on the basis of what will keep us at the table of some principality or power of this age.

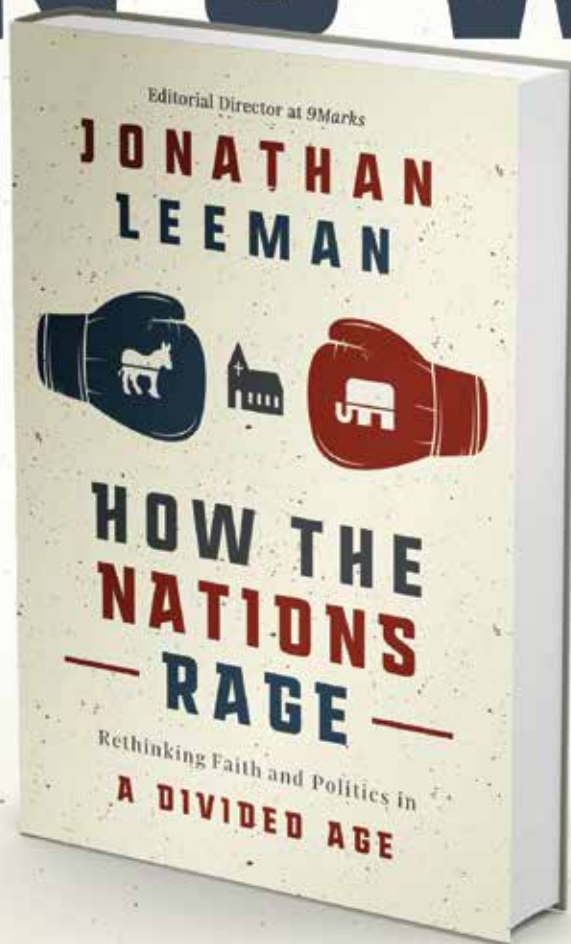
And perhaps most importantly, the church of the next generation will be a church with emotions that are often out of sync with the news cycle. We will speak for the vulnerable, including those whom the world would rather keep invisible. We will define righteousness and justice in biblical terms, not partisan ones. But we will do neither with the triumphalism of those who think they are "winners," nor with the outrage of those who think they are "losers." We will bear witness to a just social and civil order, but we will do so with the affections of those who seek a City not made with human hands.

It's easy to think we are changing the world, when in reality we're just yelling at screens.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Russell D. Moore is the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. You can find him on Twitter at @drmoore.

AVAILABLE
NOW



JONATHAN LEEMAN, editorial director at the ministry 9Marks, challenges Christians frustrated with today's divisions to hit the restart button by living as citizens of another kingdom and offering the world a totally **NEW KIND OF POLITICS**.