

## *Pondering Religion & Politics*

Politics and religion. They are topics that many people avoid, claiming that both tend to sow division.

As a preacher who keeps constant tabs on politics, I suppose that makes me a naturally divisive person.

But I'm in good company. After all, the men who pledged life, liberty and fortune to establish our nation were, on the whole, God-fearing men who were as concerned about the affairs of the church as those of the state.

Divisive? I suppose you could say they were. But God used their principled divisiveness to create a nation where the church could flourish, righteousness could be pursued, and the Gospel could be preached freely and with power.

We really cannot *avoid* caring about politics and religion.

Christ's claim on us is absolute – so our faith, and the “religion” that flows from it, should be *the* motivating factor of our lives. At the same time, God has richly blessed us by providing a nation where we can serve Him freely. With that blessing comes the responsibility to protect those freedoms for future generations by participating in politics. We *must* care about religion and politics.

Of course, because Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords, our responsibility to serve Him infinitely outweighs our responsibility toward any political philosophy or movement. So our priorities should be clear.

The question that remains is: what should be the relationship of *religion* to *politics*? To what degree should our Christian faith influence our politics? To what degree, and in what ways, should religion enter into the public square?

The question filled my mind and heart all of last week.

Early in the week, several URC ministers from the area met with a member of one of the Iowa churches who is involved in a group that seeks to overturn Iowa's year-long standing as one of the states where “homosexual marriage” is permitted. (I put it in quotes, because marriage is heterosexual by definition – see Gen. 2:23-24; Mark 10:2-9; Matt. 19:3-9; and 1 Cor. 7:1-5.)

We all agreed that the cause of legally re-establishing a biblical definition of marriage is a godly cause. The question that raised some debate was the role of the church. Should a consistory make a statement about such matters? Should the minister, while acting in his capacity as a minister? If not, why not? But if so ... what are the boundaries? About what issues should we speak; and about what issues should we maintain silence?

The issue arose again in some reading material.

Have you heard of “The Patriot Declaration”? It's a call for citizens to renew their commitment to the Constitution and its principles, aiming to preserve our freedom from tyranny. The document is brief but pointed, laying out causes and goals that are concrete and clear. It urges citizens to attach their names, pledging to work toward restoring the rule of law in our nation.

The Patriot Declaration is a document whose time has come. Much of what is being pursued by our elected officials in Washington is contrary to what our Constitution permits. If they continue, they *will* bring tyranny. History attests to it.

I haven't found one thing in the Patriot Declaration with which I disagree. It is wise and Godly, throughout. I have no qualms in signing my name to it.

But: as a minister, may I do so? Or might some regard such an action as compromising my calling to proclaim Christ? If so, is *any* Christian free to sign?

More reading. Two Dordt College professors, writing in separate forums, publicly state their support for President Obama and his policies. Both admit that he is pro-abortion; yet both excuse this, claiming that the “good” changes he is bringing about outweigh the negative of his support for abortion.

Should I allow that to make a difference in what I advise young people who are evaluating their college choices? As a pastor, do I have the right – or, on the other hand, do I have a duty – to note and evaluate such public statements from those who represent institutions we have historically supported?

History helps to shed appropriate light on such matters.

In the mid-1700s, as much as two-thirds of the British economy depended upon slavery. It was a vital component of Great Britain's commerce and wealth.

That bothered the conscience of a young politician named William Wilberforce. His heart could not rest, knowing that his nation was ignoring the atrocities committed against men and women unrighteously enslaved. So he began fighting to outlaw the slave trade. He introduced legislation, organized public meetings, began work to publicly fight that that evil institution.

His reward? Scorn and ridicule. A respected politician scoffed that, “Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life.”

Wilberforce was disheartened, to say the least. He wondered whether he was making a difference – and whether he should be pursuing the fight at all. Was he wrong to impose his religious convictions via politics? But he was strengthened by Godly men who taught him that the principles of God's Word *must* influence the Christian's politics. John Newton – a former slave ship owner led by Christ to repent and become a minister – counseled Wilberforce: "The Lord has raised you up for the good of His church and for the good of the nation." *For church and for nation.*

Among our spiritual forefathers stands Abraham Kuyper. As a young man, he was a theological liberal. But the wise and Godly members of his first church converted Kuyper. They led him to embrace the Bible – and God's Word transformed Kuyper. He, in turn, sought to transform the Netherlands.

Kuyper became a well-respected preacher, writer and theologian.

He also became a Christian political leader – even serving a term as prime minister. Kuyper's consistent aim was to draw Dutch society back to the Bible. Some criticized his mixing of religion and politics. But Kuyper replied, "Being afraid and shying away from politics is not Christian and is not ethical."

Kuyper said the Christian must not strive to become a great politician. "We are called to cling to the banner of the Cross, to go heroically into battle, not for personal honor or power, for high office or financial gain, but for Christ and His future, for the spiritual deliverance of our country, so that when Christ returns, there will be found on our soil, too ... a people that does not strive against Him but hails Him with a Hallelujah!"

It was that same goal that led the Scottish Reformed Presbyterians to take a stand that led many of them to the grave in the "killing times" of 1660-1688. They insisted that Christ alone must be the Head of the Church and the King of the nation. If the king would not bow to Christ, they would not bow to the king.

The conviction that Christ must be confessed as king over every part of life and society was so precious to them that Scotland was bathed with their blood.

And that brings me back to modern-day America.

Do we have the *right* to mix religion and politics? I believe we do. In fact, I believe that Christians have the *obligation* to serve and confess Christ as King in *all things*. Our confession of Christ must be the *basis* of our political activity.

We are called to oppose abortion because God said: "You shall not kill."

We are called to oppose homosexual marriage because God established marriage as a human representation of Christ and His Church.

We are called to fight socialism because God taught us to reject false gods and to oppose stealing and coveting.

We cannot answer these political challenges apart from the wisdom God provides. And because of what God has taught us, we cannot ignore these political challenges.

It is not the role of the church – as the church – to fight those battles. The church as an institution is called to administer the means of grace (preaching and the sacraments) and to shepherd the flock of Christ through preaching, teaching, and mutual discipline (Eph. 2:19-22; Eph. 4:1-16).

However, having been led into Christ's truth, His sheep are called to live as a *light* within a world of darkness (Matt. 5:14-16). In the world, we are called to confess Christ as King – even as we call others to join us (Matt. 10:32-33).

That means my calling, and the calling of the elders, is to help the church think through what it means to confess Christ in the face of abortion, homosexual marriage, and the countless other ethical dilemmas presented by our society. We're called to help you evaluate these challenges in the light of God's Word, and then to urge you to respond.

And your calling – *our* calling – is to respond faithfully in Christ's name. That response should take us to the polling booth, the pro-life rally, the political convention, and perhaps even into political office. It's a calling that should have God's glory as its goal and the fearless confessing of Christ as its means.

Religion ... and politics. The combination will divide people – there's no avoiding that. But, done in love and borne of faith, it can end a society's toleration of slavery. It can cause a nation to renounce the atrocity of abortion. It can bring a nation to its knees in repentance.

Or it can lead us to the grave, as brave soldiers of Christ.

Whichever outcome our King chooses, let us follow Him as brave soldiers of Christ. And may God be glorified as His people seek to take every aspect, every issue, every square inch of life captive to the cross!