

A Position Paper On Faith and Politics

INTRODUCTION

The English word *politics* is taken from the Greek word *polites* which means “a citizen of a *polis* (city).” Human societies have always been and will be defined by the struggle and tension of many individuals learning to live as citizens of a single community.

For Christians, following Jesus invites us to an even greater ethic than simply “learning to live.” As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:3, we are to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace,” in relation to our fellow Christians. In Jeremiah 29:7, the prophet calls us to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile,” in relation to our fellow citizens.

Often, we need to be reminded that our stories are intertwined, with both our fellow Christians and to our unbelieving city. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “we must learn to live together as brothers, or perish together as fools.”

This paper is an attempt to help us navigate the unique challenge of political polarization and division in this tumultuous time—to provoke greater love, deeper thought, and resolved commitment to loving God, our neighbor, and one another more fervently. Below are a few beliefs, responses, and considerations to help us get started. These are all a part of a “first word,” not a final and definitive “last word.”

THREE BELIEFS

1. **IMAGO DEI (Image of God)**: In Genesis, we are told that the Creator God breathes His own Spirit into humanity. All human beings are created in, and bear the image of, God. This means that every human being has intrinsic value and inalienable dignity given them by their Creator. This clear Scriptural doctrine has dramatic implications for how we treat those with whom we disagree (we must treat enemies as though they are created by God). This is also a lens by which Christians see and evaluate the world and its systems—and is the Biblical basis for human dignity and justice.
2. **SIN**: The creation account in Genesis also tells us of the tragedy of sin. God’s good world and the humans in it have been disordered and marred by human rebellion against God and his plan for his glory and our flourishing. By rejecting God as the source of wisdom and sole arbiter between what is good and evil, human beings now live with the potential for immense evil within them. Human history is the story of people unleashing that destructive potential, upon one another and the world at large. No one is without blame in the nexus web of sin. As Paul writes in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned.”
3. **GRACE**: Thankfully, sin does not have the last word. The story of the Bible is in many ways the story of grace. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” God’s grace is a gift that

changes us into different sorts of people, saved from our sin, redeemed from our brokenness. But as the writer Dallas Willard reminds us, “God’s grace is opposed to earning, but it is not opposed to effort.” The gift of God’s grace calls us to “make every effort,” (in words of Peter from 2 Peter 1), to partner with God in the work of bringing to bear God’s original vision for his good world.

THREE RESPONSES

These three beliefs demand that we adopt three particular responses, which should season our speech and actions when it comes to politics (and all of life):

- 1. JUSTICE as our Response to IMAGO DEI.** If we actually believe that all humans have inalienable dignity, we have to respond when that value and dignity is threatened. This is a key link between the mission of God (missiology) and the purpose of the Church (ecclesiology). The Church is primarily a missionary community, seeking to share and bring to bear the Gospel (Good News). An undeniable part of this Good News is that our God is a God of justice. This means that in our political engagement, and beyond, we must commit to partnering with God in the work of confronting injustice. It is also important to note here that God’s call to justice is one that works to achieve reconciliation, the unity of all people, brought together, despite our differences, as the one people of God. And reconciliation often necessitates confrontation, confession, repentance, acknowledgement of sin, etc.; difficult but necessary elements to becoming a people of justice.
- 2. INTEGRITY as our Response to SIN.** It is clear that the Bible takes sin—and its destructive effects—seriously. Sin is an invader in God’s good world and causes *disintegration*—disrupting and disconnecting the collective goodness of God’s created order. Therefore, the correct response of those who want to walk with God faithfully is to live *integrated* lives—with *integrity* and *fidelity* to the way of Jesus. We want our inner lives and our outer actions to be consistent with the Scriptures. This means that character matters. When it comes to our political engagement, this means we choose to speak with integrity and to stand for integrity. We must daily pray, as King David prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart/see if there is any wayward way within me” and then “lead me in the way of everlasting life.”
- 3. HUMILITY as our Response to GRACE.** We have been rescued, saved and redeemed by the grace of God. This gift came to us before we did anything to earn it and is so astonishing in its completeness and never-ending abundance that the only proper response is *humility*. When it comes to our political engagement in general, and our response/reaction to those on the other end of the political spectrum in particular, we must remember grace and embrace humility. We know we’ve received much, and want to live out that gratitude humbly. We believe this should season our dealings with all people in how we talk, act and behave. This means, as James 1:19 reminds us, being, “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.”

SOME OBSERVATIONS

1. WE'RE WORRIED ABOUT THE EFFECT THAT SO MUCH POLITICAL ENTERTAINMENT IS HAVING ON PEOPLE'S INTERIOR LIVES.

The easiest way to get “clicks” (and therefore money) is to bypass reason and manipulate the limbic system by appealing to primal emotions, like pleasure, shame, disgust, tribalism, controversy, identity affirmation, sex, and hate. The fruit of this tree is rotten. Tim Keller has astutely pointed out that most folks in his church spend more time immersed in the narratives of MSNBC and Fox News than they do the Scriptures. Jesus wants our imaginations to be primarily shaped by the transformational and transcendent stories of the Bible.

2. MODERN POLITICS IS LARGELY ABOUT THE EXPRESSION OF THE SELF—WHICH IS ACTUALLY ANTITHETICAL TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP.

People's response to national political events is, in many ways, a national Rorschach test. We project onto our president what *we want*. In fact, we vote for the president as a Quid Pro Quo - I will give you the most sacred thing I have (my endorsement, which is to share my identity) in exchange for you giving me what I want (usually visibility and power and endorsements to the things that matter to me). This is a problem because Jesus is not running for office, he's already sitting on the throne. He's the King. These two ways of seeing the world don't map onto each other. Followers of Jesus are commanded to die to self, not exalt it. We're called to a life of humble service, not one seeking power and status.

3. THE CONFLATION OF RELIGION AND PARTISAN POLITICS IS A DETRIMENT TO BOTH.

Our nation has two broad political coalitions which have both become theological worlds unto themselves. It's not surprising—given our unique history—that one encounters a great deal of both “messianic” language (this candidate will *save us*) or “apocalyptic” language (this person is *evil*, and will usher in *destruction*) in equal measure. As such, it's become harder and harder for Christians to find a place to stand on public issues that aren't blatantly partisan. Historically, the most successful Christian-influenced reform movements have transcended partisan divisions, finding supporters in both political parties instead of being associated with just one.

4. THE TRUTH MATTERS, REGARDLESS OF WHICH “SIDE” IT'S FROM.

As Christians, speaking truthfully about the world and reality is of paramount importance. But in an age of conspiracy theories and extreme levels of suspicion/skepticism toward politicians, media, etc., finding and speaking the truth can be difficult. As Christians, we must reclaim our calling as people of truth. It is not divisive to share facts, when spoken in humility and with integrity. In return, we must also be willing to receive, in humility and with integrity, the truth when it reveals itself clearly, even if (maybe, especially when) it requires the admission, “I was wrong.”

5. THE CHURCH'S ROLE IS TO TRANSCEND POLITICS, NOT BE A PART OF IT.

Part of maintaining the prophetic witness of the Church is to be what Francis Shaeffer calls a “co-belligerent”—which means thoughtfully affirming the good and courageously confronting the

bad, wherever we see it. Our loyalty must never be given blindly to a particular politician nor political party. The American Church could lose or lessen its ability to help people if it trades its prophetic distance for access to political power.

6. THE CHURCH HAS SURVIVED (AND THRIVED) UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES FAR MORE DIRE THAN THESE. FEAR HAS NO PLACE HERE.

Amongst many, there is a serious and genuine fear that if a particular candidate or party does not win, then America (and the American Church) will be destroyed. Author and commentator David French calls this “Flight 93 rhetoric.” However, this “we must charge the cockpit or we will all die” rhetoric is not just untrue, it has dangerous, real-world consequences. Practically, our political freedoms are not as fragile as some believe. The prospect of a government being able to stamp out the Church of Jesus is not only improbable, but also theologically impossible. In Matthew 16, Jesus tells Peter that He will build his church, and that “the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” The Church is God’s and He has promised in the pages of Scripture to protect and guide His people through the tumults of history. Two thousand years of Church history, and the incredible growth of the persecuted Church around the world today, bears witness to this. Christians must continue to proclaim this truth and stand in confidence behind it. The Church is not, and has not ever, been at risk of collapse.