

SHOULD CHRISTIANS DO POLITICS? IF SO, HOW?

Outline of remarks presented to an Adult Discipleship class at American Reformed Church (Orange City, Iowa) on March 4, 2018

DO YOU HAVE TO BE CRAZY OR A GLUTTON FOR PUNISHMENT TO WANT TO DO POLITICS?

Given the current dysfunction in the political system in America, there appear to be many reasons for Christians to avoid involvement in the political process. Here are a few.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM HAS NUMEROUS STRUCTURAL DEFICIENCIES

The structural deficiencies in the American Political System are legion.¹ Some of the most prevalent problems are as follows:

RESTRICTING VOTING RIGHTS: The restricting of voting rights in some states that include unreasonably tough voter ID laws, eliminating election-day registration, and reducing the possibility of early voting.

GERRYMANDERING: The re-drawing of district boundaries by the political party in power to protect incumbents from that party from being voted out of office.

CLOSED PRIMARIES: Limiting voting in Party primaries to those who declare their party affiliation at a specified time before the election (in contrast to “semi-closed primaries” that allow independents to participate and/or allow new voters to register and choose their primary on the day of the primary, or “open primaries” that feature a single ballot with candidates from all parties; with all citizens having the opportunity to vote and the top vote getter from each party becomes that party’s nominee in the general election).

POLITICS HAS BEEN TAKEN OVER BY EXTREMISTS

The Closed Primary system described above tends to produce lower turnout in primaries, attracts more ideologically extreme voters, and selects fewer moderate candidates. As a result, there is a “hollowing-out of the middle,” where moderate politicians are a vanishing breed and extremists are exerting increasing influence in both major political parties. This often leads to political discourse where extremists are not willing to even

¹ For elaboration, see Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than it Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2012, 131-162.

talk about the possibility finding “common middle ground” in-between extreme positions.

POLITICAL DISCOURSE IS BRUTAL

The vanishing of moderates in both major parties has led to what political scientist Kevin den Dulk has called “Political Tribalism,”² where extremists on both sides of the political aisle make the unwarranted horrendous leap from saying that because those in the other party are “wrong” about a given public policy issue, they are “immoral/evil.” This unwarranted assertion leads to name-calling and demonization of the “other” which makes conversation about their disagreements virtually impossible.

ONLY THE RICH AND POWERFUL HAVE SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Money and the power of special interest groups are having an inordinate influence with politicians and political parties. Therefore, the voices of the average citizen and, especially, the voices of the poor and marginalized in American society are being “crowded out.” As a result, the democratic ideal of “equality of political representation” is rapidly diminishing.

NONE OF THIS IS GOING TO CHANGE ANYTIME SOON

Those already exerting significant power and inordinate influence in the present political climate will not be quick to give up that power and influence. The status quo suits them fine. Therefore, there appears to be little hope that the deficiencies in American politics enumerated above will be eliminated or ameliorated in the near future.

WHY, THEN, SHOULD CHRISTIANS DO POLITICS?

In light of the above rather grim perspective on the brokenness of American politics today, why would any Christian even contemplate entering the political arena? *Because God intends to redeem all aspects of Creation, however broken.*

This broad perspective on God’s redemptive purposes differs markedly from the narrow perspective into which I was socialized in my home church in Brooklyn. At that church in the pietistic Lutheran tradition, we were led to believe that God’s redemptive purposes begin and end with the salvation of individuals. I now embrace the broader perspective that God wishes to redeem, though Jesus Christ, not only individual persons, but every area of life and the cosmos, including the political realm. This perspective, embraced by

² Kevin den Dulk, “The Spirit of the Parties,” in the electronic conversation (eCircle) on “Reforming Political Discourse” hosted on the web site www.respectfulconversation.net, January 2018.

the Reformed Christian tradition, in theory if not always in practice, is clearly taught in Colossians 1: 19-20.

For in him [Jesus Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Furthermore, based on biblical teachings regarding the “Body of Christ” (e.g., I Corinthians 12), I believe that God’s expansive redemptive purposes for Creation are primarily accomplished by Christians, individually and collectively, “partnering with God” by planting “tiny seeds of redemption,” entrusting the redemptive harvest to God (see the Parable of the Mustard Seed recorded in Matthew 13: 31-32), with each Christian contributing an accordance with his/her particular gifts and abilities.

Of course, this means that NOT ALL Christians are called to participate in that portion of the political realm navigated by politicians and political parties in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of local, state and national government (why I call this only a “portion” of the political realm will become apparent later). But some Christians should consider this possible vocation if their gifts fit well with that type of redemptive work. What are those particular “gifts?” It depends on your answer to the next question: How should Christians do politics? (soon to be addressed in detail). But to give you an early hint as to how I will answer that question, I share with you the following words spoken about Paul Henry, the late U. S. congressman from Michigan: “His welcoming personality, and skills in listening, balancing and synthesizing made Paul perfectly suited for legislative representation.”

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS DO POLITICS?

The question of how Christians should do politics, if at all, is very contentious. To prepare you for my response, I need to make clear how I am using the word “politics.” I believe that “**politics**,” in its broadest sense, is “**seeking to forge a flourishing common life together across differences**” (including agreements and disagreements as to a possible common good). According to this definition, not only is “government” a political entity (I am now using “government” as a shorthand for the executive, legislative and judicial branches of local, state and national governing bodies). But any gathering of two or more people who are trying to figure out how to live well together is a political entity. This includes all kinds of “non-governmental” groups, such as families, businesses, churches, local communities (like Orange City) and numerous voluntary organizations (e.g., service organizations fraternal organizations, sports clubs).

Given that context, I respond to the question of how Christians should do politics in two sections: one dealing with “doing politics” in the governmental realm; and one dealing with “doing politics” in the non-governmental realm.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE GOVERNMENTAL REALM

For those contemplating entering the governmental realm of politics, I have three recommendations for your consideration:

IF YOU ARE AN EXTREMIST, DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT GOING INTO GOVERNMENTAL POLITICS

As already suggested, I consider a politician in either major political party to be an “extremist” if he/she holds to a position so strongly that he/she is not willing to even talk to someone who holds to a contrary position in an attempt to find some “common ground.” Extremists seem to be taking over the political realm. The American political scene doesn't need any more. More importantly, going into governmental politics as a “Partisan Tribalist” with the intention to demonize your political opponents is clearly antithetical to my understanding of Christian teachings. To demonize or silence someone who disagrees with you is a violation of the command of Jesus that those who aspire to be His followers should “love others” (Mark 12:31). A deep expression of such love (albeit, often neglected) is for you to create a safe and welcoming space for someone who disagrees with you (about public policy issues or anything else) to express his/her position, with the hope that as each of you listens carefully to the other, discerning the reasons each of you has for your respective positions, you will be able to find some common ground or, at least, illuminate your disagreements enough to lay the foundation for ongoing respectful conversations.

What we need is more Christian politicians who reject the idea that politics is primarily about “winning” or getting a point across; but, rather, “doing politics” provides opportunities for Christians to “love” their political opponents by engaging in the respectful conversations needed to identify some common ground. To be effective in this “middle-of-the-road” role you will need the gifts that characterized the late U. S. Congressman Paul Henry: skills in listening, balancing and synthesizing. If God has granted you such gifts, a career in governmental politics may be your way to plant tiny seeds of redemption, if you could get elected, which is a huge “if” (a topic to which I now turn).

DARE TO SWIM UPSTREAM

If you decide to run for elected office, take two aspirin and call me in the morning (a little humor; very little). Seriously, how well will the “respectful conversation” strategy outlined above work during your campaign for office? There is virtually no evidence that it will work well. It appears that you can't get elected to governmental positions these days unless you are willing to demean your opponent, casting him/her in the worst possible light. But I wonder if another way to campaign for

office, a “Christian way,” doesn’t appear to be feasible because it hasn’t been adequately tried.

If you have it in your mind to run for political office, I have a bold recommendation for your consideration. Dare to “swim upstream.” Run a campaign based on the “respectful conversation” strategy suggested above. You may not get elected. But it will give you the opportunity to plant a tiny seed of redemption into our current paradigm for political campaigning.

And if you do get elected, you will have the opportunity to propose public policy initiatives that are informed by your Christian values (on a level playing field with other proposals that are informed by differing worldview commitments) and you can work on addressing the current structural deficiencies in governmental politics.

CREATE MODELS FOR RESPECTFUL CONVERSATION ABOUT PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES IN YOUR SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

But not all Christians will sense a calling to become politically active in the governmental realm by running for elective office or getting involved in some other way in the executive, legislative or judicial branches of local, state or national governing bodies. Some Christians, like me, may discern that their God-given gifts and abilities fit better with a more indirect way to plant redemptive seeds in governmental politics.

In brief, I have chosen to be “politically active” in the governmental realm by developing and hosting a ten-month electronic conversation” on the topic “Reforming Political Discourse.” On my website, www.respectfulconversation.net, this eCircle, which stated on September 1, 2017, devotes one month to each of ten subtopics, with two or more conversation partners addressing a Leading Question (or two), with the conversation partners chosen to ensure the presentation of differing responses. The subtopics include: Talking Past Each Other and Worse; Party Politics and Beyond; The Role of Money and Special Interests in Politics; Immigration; Healthcare; and Case Study Conversations Regarding Political Discourse and Political Action Within Churches and Christian Para-Church Organizations. As for the past three eCircles on contentious topics that I have hosted on my web site, I plan on publishing a book that will capture the highlights of this e Circle, tentatively titled *Reforming American Politics: A Christian Perspective*.

Compared to running for elected political office, this is a modest initiative (until you try it). But there is an entirely different realm for potential political activity for Christians by means of initiatives that can be taken by non-governmental groups, a topic to which I now turn.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL REALM

Because of the many structural deficiencies in the governmental political system noted above, and the numerous obstacles to overcoming these deficiencies, it is important for Christians to think about ways in which they can become “politically active” in the non-governmental realms noted above: families, businesses, churches, local communities and voluntary organizations.

A local example of such “political activism” is the work of CASA of Sioux County (Center for Service, Assistance and Advocacy), a non-profit organization with no paid staff (all their work is carried out by volunteers) and a very small office (a mailbox in the Sioux Center Post Office). The “vision” of CASA is for “transformed Northwest Iowa communities that welcome, empower and celebrate people from all cultures.” In particular, CASA focuses on helping the Anglo and Latino residents of Sioux County to “forge a flourishing common life together across differences,” which makes CASA a political entity according to my broad definition of “politics.”

Some of CASA’s initiatives interact directly with government. For example, members of CASA have had face-to-face meetings with both national and state elected politicians (Steve King, Charles Grassley, Randy Feenstra, Skyler Wheeler) to advocate for various aspects of immigration reform.

But many of CASA’s initiatives are not connected to any of the three branches of government; such as hosting an annual Latino Festival that celebrates the riches of local Latino culture, and participation in the JUNTOS program that reaches out to Latino high school youth and their families in Sioux Center to explore further schooling and employment possibilities after high school graduation.

The reason I highlight the work of CASA is that it is clear example of the “grass-roots” approach to political activism that is growing increasingly attractive to citizens who are fed up with the dysfunction and inaction in governmental circles. This leads me to provocatively suggest that churches should become more “politically active.” This suggestion will surely raise many eyebrows.

To anticipate some concerns, I will first tell you what I DON’T mean when I suggest that churches should become “politically active.” I don’t mean that churches should endorse particular candidates for political office or align themselves with any particular political party. I believe that such practices clearly violate a proper understanding of the “separation of church and state” that needs to be maintained.

But, then, what do I mean when I suggest that it is appropriate for churches to become involved in “political activism” other than by means of the two examples that I rule out above? The overarching framework for my response to this question is that a given church (or para-church organization) should first decide on its “Core values” and then ask

how seeking to be “live out” those core values does, or does not, call for some form of political activism. I will illustrate with the example of a hypothetical church.

Let us suppose that a church decides that its “Core values” include the values of justice, Shalom and community, elaborated as follows:³

JUSTICE: All people in our church, our community and beyond should be treated “equally” (“fairly”), with special concern for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in society.

Justice is a multi-faceted concept and the meanings of “fair” and “equal” are open for debate. But, at a minimum, Christians are called to seek for the flourishing of those members of society who are poor, oppressed, and marginalized in any way (e.g., those who have been rendered “voiceless” in the political realm), ensuring that they have “fair and equal” access to the good things in life that the “privileged” too often take for granted.” That this is a Christian value is clearly articulated in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament (e.g., the books of Amos and Isaiah) and in the teachings of Jesus recorded in Matthew 25.

SHALOM: All people should experience “shalom”; living in positive, caring relationships with other persons and with all aspects of Creation.

Although the Hebrew word “shalom” is often translated as “peace,” it is important to note that the deeper meaning of “shalom” should not be confused with the negative western definition of “peace” as the “absence of conflict.” Rather, it includes creating and sustaining loving relationships with all persons with whom you engage, even those with whom you have “conflicting” beliefs (e.g., about public policy issues). This calls for orchestrating “respectful conversations” about disagreements for the purpose of learning from one another rather than “submerging” such disagreements in the name of an inadequate, anemic view of the meaning of “peace.”

COMMUNITY: We will care for the needs of all persons around us, not just for our own needs and those of our immediate family and friends.

Commitment to this Christian value is a stark rejection of the hyper-individualism that is rampant in American culture. It is clear from Biblical teachings that we are to care for all people in need, including our families and friends, but also extending to all members of our church, our local community and beyond.

³ I did not just “pull these three values out of a hat.” These three values emerged out of a conversation among three political scientists and one sociologist as to Christian values that are particularly pertinent to the “doing of politics.” For considerable elaboration, see “Party Politics and Beyond” in the electronic conversation (eCircle) on “Reforming Political Discourse” hosted on the web site www.respectfulconversation.net, January 2018.

If a church embraces these three Christian values, what are the implications, if any, for “political activism?” Each such church will have to answer that question for itself. My personal response is that it will, at a minimum, call for the church to encourage all of its individual members who have the requisite gifts and abilities to become “politically active” in the broad sense of the meaning of “politics” that I have proposed, either in governmental or non-governmental spheres of political involvement. Such involvement does not necessarily call for allegiance to any one politician or political party. Rather, it is an expression of commitment to the non-partisan Christian values of justice, shalom and community.

The looming question then remains as to whether, in addition to the encouragement given to individual members to engage in such “political activism” in accordance with their gifts and abilities, a Church that is committed to these “core values” should take a “church wide” position on any given public policy issue. I believe that such a church needs to be open to that possibility, on a case-by-case basis; choosing to take a “church-wide” position on selected public policy issues because failure to do so is a failure to be true to the Christian values of justice, shalom and community. But other members of such a church may disagree, which would call for some “respectful conversations” about that disagreement.”