

“IS GOD A REPUBLICAN?”

(1 Peter 2:13-17)

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[PROP NEEDED: Brian's "*Election Campaign*" Inspirational Minute Video]

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 10-27-24]

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1. Read CEB Text: 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Pray.
2. Is God... really... a Republican? ...or a Democrat?...or an Independent? I don't know about you, but over the last year or so, I've experienced people who's words and actions seem to imply that this is so.

A--At the same time, I've experienced *other* people who seem to want faith & spirituality to be kept far away from anything "political" -- saying that the church (& Christians) "just need to stick to talking about spiritual things" (like sin, salvation, and love) and "keep politics out of the church" altogether!

B--So *what -- exactly -- IS the appropriate, biblical relationship between Christian faith and worldly politics?*

C--Well, at the risk of alienating pretty much *everyone* that's listening to this sermon, this is nevertheless precisely the question I felt God was wanting us to tackle today as we approach Election Day here in America (a week from this Tuesday).

3. To do this, I want to define these two terms (faith and politics), to talk about how today's scripture helps us avoid two dangers in dealing with them, and also to suggest a few implications I think this teaches us as we prepare for this year's elections.

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4. First, let's define the two terms.
A--For purposes of today's message, by "**FAITH**" I'm referring the *core beliefs & values that shape and guide our life*. Now, these can *include* beliefs about God and religion, but also include our *broader* understanding of humanity and ultimate reality, whether we are "religious" or not (i.e., you don't have to be "religious" to have "faith"). ¹

B--"**POLITICS**," on the other hand, has to do with the *distribution of power and control* as we *live out* those beliefs and values -- it's what political scientist and sociologist Harold Lasswell (in 1936) classically described as "*the process for determining WHO gets WHAT, WHEN, and HOW.*" ²

C--So, we start with the fact that these two terms (faith & politics) -- while *different* from each other -- are also not *unconnected*; they *presume* each other (you can't have one without the other). ³

5. Unfortunately throughout history there are **PEOPLE WHO'VE MADE THE OPPOSITE MISTAKES** of either... (#1) trying to *merge* these two into *one*, OR (#2) insisting that they are totally *separate*.

A--If we listen to much of the advertisements & rhetoric in today politics, the implication is often that the *first* of these is the case... that God & Christian faith are equal to the political views and methods of ONE particular group or party... as if politics & faith are the same thing, & that "*to be a Christian means we have to vote this way or that.*"

B--In fact, we humans have used this tactic for thousands of years, whether it was worship of the Emperor as "god" during the Roman Empire,...

1--...or the elevating of Christianity by Emperor Constantine in 312 CE into being the official State religion of Rome,...

2--... or in how most Medieval period European monarchies understood their Kings to be the *hand* of God on earth,...

3--...or how modern Islamic Caliphates(holy states like Iran, Iraq, & Afghanistan), consider the law of *God* and the law of the *state* to be one and the same,...

4--...or even how today's "Christian Nationalism" here in America insists on *certain forms* of Christianity being our country's quasi-state religion. ⁴

C--My point is that we humans have a tendency to use religion to justify our own particular *brand* of politics -- in the words of one author, we like to "*play with politics and power in the name of God.*" ⁵

6. Yet, when we make this first mistake (trying to *merge* faith and politics), we face **TWO DANGERS:**

A--On the one hand, it often *leads us to use faith in support of the doing of evil.*

1--When the "politicians" of Jesus' day (the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees) were using religion to justify the suppression of certain groups and types of people, listen to what Jesus has to say about them in Matthew 12:34-37: ⁶

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? ... I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." ⁷

2--Many years later, another politician used his "faith" to justify his own brand of racism and oppression. Let me read something from one of his stump speeches and see if you can tell me who it was:

"I say, my Christian feeling tells me that my Lord and Savior is a warrior. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded only by a few followers, recognized who they -- the Jews -- really were, and summoned men to fight against them and who, by God's truth, was not the greatest sufferer but the greatest warrior" -- political rally speech by Adolf Hitler (1922). ⁸

3--And there's more historic examples, as well: Medieval Christians slaughtering Muslims "in God's name" during the Crusades; the "Trail of Tears" & American slavery; the Klu Klux Klan; Muslim extremists in 2001 flying airplanes into buildings shouting "God is Good!"; & even Christian extremists today bombing abortion clinics "in the name of Jesus" -- all using faith to justify the doing of evil.

B--Yet, the second danger of merging faith with politics is ***the tendency to oversimplify complex issues*** -- to insist on *absolute* perspectives about what is right and wrong, and be *unwilling* to question one's own assumptions & interpretations, creating wedges & polarization in society, & discrimination Vs. people who are different, or don't agree

1--If we can just give folks short "sound bytes" that demonize people who we don't agree with, or "paint" them as evil or bad, then we can use power to justify our own prejudices and paranoia. ⁹

2--Yet, Jesus condemned this very thing in Matthew 23:23-24, where he says...
"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!" ¹⁰

3--We unfortunately even saw this in the last 2 years in our own denomination and church, where absolutist stances/views on certain theological and social issues have been used to justify outright meanness and division, and to "paint" anyone who didn't agree as "unChristian" or unbiblical.

4--Now, I'll be the first to acknowledge that there *are* some things in life that are black and white that we need to honor, respect and stand up for; but it seems to me that there are many *more* things that are "gray" than many of us are willing to acknowledge, because to do so would threaten our ability to control either *others* or at least to control our OWN world around *ourselves*.

7. Yet, if there is danger in making God and politics one and the same, what can be said of the OPPOSITE view? Is faith truly *A-political*?... meaning, politically *neutral*, with NO meaningful interaction or relationship between it and politics?

A--Well, many Christians will cite Jesus words from Matthew 22:21 as "proof" of this:
"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

B--So, for example, whenever a pastor says something that *they* perceive to be against *their* political views, the first argument I often hear is: *"We need to keep politics out of the church"* -- the assumption being that *"faith and politics are separate things!"*

C--But the problem with *this* view is that when we look at how Jesus and the early church (and the Old Testament *Jewish* community, for that matter) *engaged* with their world, we find that they were anything BUT A-political!

1--When the prophet Amos wrote (Chapter 5:24), "*Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,*" he was being political.

2--When the O.T. Jewish people assumed that their worship *alone* was all that God wanted, in Isaiah 58:6-7 God says, "*Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen?... to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?*" -- these actions are intrinsically *political* because they deal with the distribution of power!

3--When Jesus turned over the extortionist money tables in the Jerusalem Temple & drove out their owners, saying in Luke 19:46, "*My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers,*" he was being *political*.

4--When Jesus was brought before Pilate in Mark 15:2, the accusation against him was that he was claiming to be "*King of the Jews*" ¹¹ -- a *political* accusation.

5--For Christians in the early church, the earliest creed (statement of belief) was "*Jesus Is Lord,*" ¹² which in that day and time was a dangerously subversive *political* statement, because only the Roman *Emperor* was to be called "Lord".

D--So "NO," Jesus didn't run for office or seek a political position. But make no mistake... his *practice* of faith (and that of both the ancient Jewish and Christian communities) absolutely often had *political* ramifications both *back then*, and they often do today, as well! ¹³

--III--

8. So, given all of this, what CAN we say about how you and I – as people of Christian faith – are to understand and relate to politics in our world? If the two are not *equal*, but neither are they *exclusive* of each other, then how are we to thoughtfully and prayerfully *integrate* our faith with our politics?

A--Well, to begin with, let's look at today's scripture from 1 Peter 2:13-17.

B--On the one hand, it encourages us not to be afraid of using our faith in the engagement of politics -- "*submit to every human institution... [whether] the emperor... or governors*" Verses 13 & 14 say, "*because it's God's will that by doing good you will silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.*"

1--In other words, others will see our commitment to justice and to the "doing of good" through our participation and involvement in our political system. ¹⁴

2--In today's context, I think that means (at the very least) that we ALL need to *register* vote and then... VOTE!

3--It can also mean educating ourselves on the issues at stake -- not just blindly believing something from a campaign ad, but truly doing our own research. *(Don't trust political ads to impart truth; that's not what they're designed for; we have to go deeper!)*

4--And it can also mean that we Christians need to be willing at times to run for office ourselves -- to seek to enact the justice that's missing in today's world.

C--But on the other hand, 1 Peter 2 also gives us a warning NOT to use politics as justification for meanness, incivility & evil --Verse 16 says that we're to submit and be involved in our political systems "*as God's slaves, and yet also as free people, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil.*"

1--The founder of Methodist Christianity John Wesley once shared these words of advice about the 1774 British Parliamentary elections:

"I met those of our [Methodist] Society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them, ...

1) To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy;

2) To speak no evil of the person they voted against; And...

*3) To take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side."*¹⁵

2--You see, for Wesley, for Jesus, and for God, HOW we engage in politics (including how we treat those who we don't agree with or vote for) is *as important* as our participation in the political process itself.¹⁶

9. So with all of this in mind, as we wrap up, I want to leave us with some parting thoughts to consider from a lite-hearted video I created as we prepare for this year's elections...

[WATCH Brian's humorous' "*Election Campaign*" VIDEO (Total Time: 1:00)]¹⁷

10. [PRAYER: "*O God, you know and see all the rancor and rhetoric of today's world, and your heart grieves for our divisive spirits, and our human tendency to use faith as a justification for words, actions and behaviors that do not honor you. Please forgive us for mixing up faith and politics, and for using the former as a way of advancing the latter. Please forgive our tendency to long for power and control, rather than a holy desire to serve you and others. Forgive us for ways that we have intentionally or unintentionally bought into hyperbole, caricatures, misinformation, or even downright lies about people with whom we disagree, or who are somehow different from us, and for our selfish, human desire to be privileged over others -- to want to lord our particular brand of faith and politics over others.*

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Instead, help us to be more like your son Jesus: to be more kind, compassionate, forgiving, and tender-hearted; to have a servant-heart which seeks to see and encourage the good in others, rather than hearts which seek power and control over others, or which seek to find the worst in them. Yes, give us the courage and willingness (when needed) to say to others "I love you, but I disagree with your ideas," ... but to do so in a manner that honors you, and respects them as fellow children of God. Give us hearts of love and understanding towards others -- even when we disagree -- and help us to remember that no matter who the victors of our upcoming elections are, in the end YOU are the only one who can offer true and lasting help and hope in life. In the name of Jesus we pray all of this, Amen."

ENDNOTES:

¹ In this sense, "faith" also includes our understanding of what it means to be human, about what's right and wrong, just and unjust, and generally what we believe about the nature of ultimate reality. By this definition, then, ALL people have "faith" of *some* sort, whether we call ourselves "Christian," "religious," agnostic, or even atheist -- because ALL of us have thoughts and opinions about these aspects of reality. My point here is that -- however we define it -- "faith" *can't* be compartmentalized and separated from "real life". No, whether we *mean* for it to or *not*, our core beliefs and values influence *every* aspect of our lives: how we interact with our spouse and family, how we treat our neighbors, and even how we conduct business and engage with others.

² Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (1936). This definition, in turn, requires the employment of values and beliefs (i.e., some sense of what we call "morality") in order to properly determine & *adjudicate* that distribution of power and control. In other words, properly understood, "politics" *presumes* some sort of "faith." Even if it's faith in wrong/bad things, it's still faith.

³ This is because politics *requires* some sense of morality -- some way of determining what is "just" and "unjust" about WHO gets WHAT power, and HOW that occurs. In other words, politics *requires* people of faith to be engaged in the process -- people who have thoughtfully considered the issues -- so that justice can happen in the world.

⁴ For an excellent description and unpacking of "Christian Nationalism" (and why its not really Christian), watch the October 20, 2024 sermon "Is Christian Nationalism Christian?" by Rev. Adam Hamilton (United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, KS) found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HT2PO6iijk>

⁵ Gerald L. Borchert, Chapter 5, "*Political Realities and Government*," *Christ and Chaos: Biblical Keys to Ethical Questions* [Nurturing Faith, Inc.(Webber Institute Books): Macon, GA, 2020), p. 47. Today's politicians of today are not the first to do this; nor will they be the last! So, I hope that we're all smart enough to recognize that the answer to the question of "Is God a Republican? Democrat? Etc?" is "NO!", because God exists *beyond* the scope of any political party that we humans may follow.

⁶ The "political parties" of Jesus' day were the various factions of the Jewish law: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Each of these had differing perspectives on how not only to interpret Jewish Law, but also what those meant for the life and politics around them.

⁷ Matthew 12:34, 36-37; Read also Matthew 3:7-10; 23:1-36 and Luke 3:7-9.

⁸ Adolf Hitler, spoken 12 April 1922 (Norman H. Baynes, ed. *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 19...22-August 1939*, Vol. 1 of 2, pp. 19-20)

⁹ While there are *some* things that are black and white in life (and we need to honor and stand up for those), at the same time there is not nearly as many of these as we often think. They're not always as easy as "*God says it; I believe it; that settles it.*" Instead, many answers to the complex issues of life and faith are NOT always black and white, but grey. And yet, black and white is still very attractive, very popular (and very dangerous) in today's world!

¹⁰ Matthew 23:23-24.

¹¹ The structure of politics of Jesus' day was monarchy -- in the case of Palestine, it was ruled by Herod Antipas, who ruled with the permission of the "*King of Kings and Lord of Lords*" (it wasn't Jesus, but Emperor Tiberias Caesar of Rome).

¹² Romans 10:9 and Philippians 2:11.

¹³ Other examples of Jesus' "political" bent... When Jesus came preaching that "the kingdom of God is at hand," that was a political sermon and he was making a political statement that was a direct threat to the political powers and system of his day.

Jesus called people to an allegiance first and foremost to God as King, and only then to live out their lives in conjunction with the other reigning powers of the day.

When Jesus healed people, that was a *political* act -- he was saying that the Kingdom of God cares about people who are sick and in need. What might that tell us about healthcare. It doesn't give us the answer, but it does tell us that God is concerned about those who are sick and in need of care. It doesn't tell us the solution, but it does tell us that God cares about this issue and we should, too. So how we deal with healthcare and insurance today needs to be something that we think about in our political conversations.

Not only that, but many of Jesus' parables were blatantly political in nature for their time (such as the Parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46. These are both parables about social welfare - they don't tell us HOW to look after the poor and needy, but they both indicate that we as a society and as individuals have a responsibility to do so if we are citizens of the kingdom of God). Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30; does this hint at how we need to treat and be stewards of our environment?). and the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37; does this tell us anything about how we are to treat and interact with immigrants in our midst?)

And at least part of Jesus' famous "Lord's Prayer" is patently political: "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:10) — that is a political prayer. We're not just supposed to pray for this, but are supposed to work at it.

And Jesus says that "*if anyone is to be great, they must become servant of all*" (Mark 9:35). Does this tell us anything about how we as an American nation should conduct ourselves in relation to other countries on the international stage? (i.e., perhaps more humble and more of a servant to all, rather than being arrogant about our power)?

¹⁴ In a past sermon, Pastor Adam Hamilton stated that "*Our country / our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of conscience - of moral conviction- to get involved in the political process*" [Adam Hamilton in sermon "*Where Faith and Politics Meet*", preached at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection (Leawood, KS) on January 8, 2008]. Also read Chapter 21 of Adam Hamilton's book *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

¹⁵ From John Wesley's Journal, October 6, 1774; Prime Minister Lord Frederick North, 2nd Earl of Guilford, and his party defeated the Whigs and Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquess of Rockingham, rather handily in 1774.

¹⁶ Consistent with these thoughts, a number of years ago, our North Georgia United Methodist Conference Bishop's office shared the following **CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO VOTING** as a tool to use in the election voting process. I share them again here for your prayerful consideration as you prepare to cast your ballots whenever that is. Remember that, no matter what your position on the candidates or the issues, Christians have a responsibility to be involved in the selection of our leaders.

1. Trust that God cares about what we decide and what we do as a nation. Pray for our nation, for candidates, elected officials and voters. Remember that national prayers in Scripture always involve repentance as well as pleas for mercy and wisdom.

2. Come to political conversations with humility and love. Be willing to talk openly with others about the important political issues of the day even if you will not agree. Cultivate the skill of loving disagreement.

3. As Christians, we must be willing to think, ask lots of questions and listen for more than oversimplified sound bites. Issues are complex, and it can be difficult to know the faithful response in a fallen world. Find ways to encourage elected officials to discuss the systems and structures contributing to economic injustice, poverty, environmental concerns and other large issues, rather than temporary, band-aid approaches.

4. As Christians, we have our own language, our own framework of thought that will strike both "sides" on any given issue as odd. Do not let candidates manipulate your passion for a single issue at the expense of other things you care about.

5. Favor candidates who call for responsibility for the common good. Remember that as Christians we talk less about individual rights and more about God's gift of life to all people. It's less about "me" and "my rights" and more about "us."

6. Jesus reminds us in his Sermon on the Mount that in the kingdom of God, the poor are blessed. Make compassion for the disadvantaged a priority in your voting.

7. The Church resembles a family of people all around the world that transcends nationality and ethnicity. As the hymn says, "In Christ there is no east or west." Remember that we live in a global village, that God has children in all countries.

8. Look for leaders who are wise, exemplary in character and possess compassion and vision in addition to being effective.

9. Be wary of misleading advertising or campaign rhetoric that feeds on prejudice and divisiveness. Focus on the issues and candidates who can be catalysts for understanding, for bringing people together, candidates who can inspire us to get connected in the pursuit of community and justice.

10. Look for ways to embody your political ideals personally. Engage in the life of our congregation and community. Christians understand that words must be matched by actions. In his last sermon, Jesus said we would be judged, not by "Did I take the right stand on moral dilemmas" and not by "Did I think correct thoughts about the poor and their plight," but "Did I actually do something? Did I feed, clothe, visit, get involved?"

Find this article and more suggestions about God-honoring voting at <https://pastorbriang.blogspot.com/2024/10/god-honoring-election-suggestions.html>.

¹⁷ Find this video at <https://vimeo.com/1021501366?share=copy#t=0>