

Should Christian Leaders Stay Out of Politics?

Is it dangerous for Christian leaders to mix politics and religion? Is that a confusion of their calling? Or is it important for Christian leaders to address all areas of life, including politics?

I have had to address this question myself, since I might be preaching in a church service one day, teaching in a Bible school the next and talking politics on the radio the next (or sometimes doing all three in one day). How should we conduct ourselves as religious leaders?

If Donald Trump as president keeps his word and successfully repeals the Johnson Amendment, which has greatly muzzled religious political speech, this question will become all the more relevant for Christian leaders in America.

What exactly is our role?

It so happened that on the same day, in response to the same article, some old friends expressed their disapproval of my commenting on political issues. One posted on Facebook, “I remain disappointed that you continue to focus on politics Mike. Your mandate is higher! God’s purpose for you and Christian leaders is [God’s] Kingdom not this world. Leave that to others!”

Another emailed, asking, “Are you sure you want to cross over to being a daily political commentator, rather than speak[ing] primarily to spiritual issues?”

Neither of these men is a critic, and both wrote in friendly tones, but the thrust of their message was clear: To write political commentaries is to detract from my higher, spiritual calling.

I'm confident they would say this to other spiritual leaders as well.

In stark contrast, I hear from readers and listeners on a regular basis who thank me—sometimes with tears—for addressing moral, cultural and political issues, in particular, for doing so as a follower of Jesus who uses the Bible as his grid.

One man posted on Facebook that during the elections, “The only media voice I listened [to] for counsel was Dr. Brown.”

Another wrote, “Dr. Brown, I am greatly appreciative that you are engaging the political arena. It seems that a fair amount of Christian leaders shy away from the political spectrum due to a fear of losing their audience. If we want to see change in this country, then we as Christians need to engage the political system. Encourage Christian leaders to run for office so that light can shine in the darkness of the corrupt leadership that this country has given over to itself.”

Which perspective is right? Would Paul or Peter or John have gotten involved in the presidential elections? Would they have endorsed a candidate or advised a candidate or commented on the various party platforms? Would they have even voted?

Some point to Jesus' comment in John 18 when He said to Pilate shortly before His crucifixion, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). If it were of this world, He explained, then His servants would have been fighting for Him not to be delivered up to His captors.

But in saying this, Jesus hardly meant that we should not be involved in the affairs of this world. After all, feeding the hungry and clothing the poor and educating our children and working our jobs are all “of this world.” Should we stop doing these things and simply go on a mountaintop to pray, waiting for the Lord's return? (Of course, we'd soon have to figure out how to get food and where to sleep—all issues of this world.)

In reality, what Jesus was saying was this: "My kingship does not derive its authority from this world's order of things. If it did, my men would have fought to keep me from being arrested by the Judeans. But my kingship does not come from here" (John 18:36, CJB).

What about Phil. 3:20, where Paul wrote that "But our citizenship is in heaven, from where also we await for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ"?

Interestingly, it was this same Paul who, at strategic times, invoked the fact that he was a citizen of Rome, assuring he would receive better treatment than a common criminal (see, for example, Acts 16:35-39; 21:37-39).

His point in Phil. 3 had to do with those who lived with a fleshly, earthly carnality (see Phil. 3:18-19), and he was saying to his readers, "You are not like them! You are a heavenly people living in this world."

In the same way, Peter wrote, "Dearly beloved, I implore you as aliens and refugees, abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11).

We are passing through this world, and it is not our eternal home, so we must not get entangled with worldly, carnal desires, which war against our souls. We should be above such things.

But that doesn't mean that we don't fight against injustice or champion the cause of the needy, nor does it mean that we remain silent on important political and social issues.

After all, slavery was the paramount hot-button, deeply-divisive, political and social issue of the 19th century, yet it would have been wrong for Christian leaders to remain silent on this, just as it's wrong for Christian leaders to remain silent on issues like abortion and homosexual activism today.

I can't tell you how many times readers and listeners and viewers have talked with me after hearing me speak—again, often with tears in their eyes—thanking me for addressing the divisive cultural issues of the day. These are issues they live with every day—in their homes, in their schools, in their places of business, and they are frustrated when their pastors and teachers fail to give them spiritual guidance to help navigate these troubled waters.

And this is not just happening in the States. During my annual trip to India earlier this month, pastors in Mumbai specifically asked me to address LGBT issues, while in other international trips in the last few years, Christian leaders in the government have met with me privately (or publicly), asking for input on these same pressing social issues. They want to know what they can do as believers to make a positive impact on their society, and that includes the realm of politics and government.

Of course, we can get involved in politics in a partisan way, becoming appendages of a particular political party, which is a real mistake. And we can easily get caught up in a divisive, immature political spirit, which is quite destructive, or we can become obsessed with politics, which would distract us from our larger calling.

That's one reason that, on my radio show, we devote certain days to theology and Bible study, while I spend much of my time teaching and preaching in churches and conferences—and not talking about politics.

But there's nothing stopping us from walking in the Spirit, maintaining an eternal perspective and constructively addressing the political realm. In fact, it behooves us to do so as long as we don't neglect our primary calling of preaching and teaching the Scriptures. The church needs us to do it and the society needs us to do it.

I'm confident I am not alone in sensing that it pleases God and helps His people when we, as ministry leaders, bring the Word of God to bear on every area of life, politics included.

Do you agree? {eoa}