

# The Fine (and Often Blurry) Line Between Religion and Politics

President Trump's historic speech to the March for Life crowd on Friday reminds us that there is often a very fine (and, quite often, very blurry) line between religion and politics. And as much as some of us would like to separate those two entities, putting each of them in their own category, it's not always so easily done.

On the one hand, the realm of religion—in the best sense of the word—is not political at all. It calls for human beings to come into right relationship with God, whether those human beings live in a dictatorship or a democracy. It offers new life, forgiveness, redemption and transformation (speaking here in specific Christian terms). And it does all this without politics, without court decisions and without elections.

“Jesus saves” regardless of who is in office, regardless of political trends, regardless of partisan politics.

In short, the gospel completely transcends politics.

Politics do not produce divinely inspired Scriptures.

Politics cannot reward with eternal salvation or punish with eternal damnation.

Politics cannot reach into the world to come.

Politics cannot change a person from the inside out.

In short, in a very real way, the gospel and politics do not intersect.

But then, in another very real way, they do.

Let's take something that virtually all of us agree is terribly evil: human trafficking.

Let's say you find out that young teens are being trafficked in your own city. Deeply burdened, you share this with your pastor, who then shares it with your church, calling for urgent prayer.

But does it stop there? Don't you see what action you can take to help rescue and rehabilitate these children?

And what if you learn that there are serious loopholes in the law, because of which trafficking is allowed to flourish in your city? Do you not then call on your elected officials to take action as well?

Isn't this what moved the abolitionists to action? And didn't they call on the government to act rightly as well?

Or consider something broader—namely, the economy.

What if government laws and regulations were set up in such a way as to oppress the poor and enable their oppressors? Should Christians merely pray for justice or simply hand out food? Or should they also work to change the system?

When William Carey, known as the father of modern missions, moved from England to India, he was shocked to witness the practice of widow burning. In this horrific custom, when a husband's body was burned after death, his wife was often burned along with him—meaning, burned alive.

There were social and spiritual reasons for the practice, but Carey rightly found it to be ghastly inhuman, successfully campaigning for its abolition.

Isn't this where politics and religion intersect?

On Jan. 14, Live Action reported that, "California Governor Gavin Newsom has made a statement announcing that he wants the state to stop euthanizing animals. In a press conference, Newsom laid out the details for his budget for the upcoming year, which includes a \$50 million one-time general fund allocation to the UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program. The purpose is to develop a grant program for animal shelters in the state, because Newsom wants to see an end to the killing of animals. The killing of human beings in the womb, however, evidently doesn't bother Newsom as much."

This is a spiritual matter, not just a secular matter. And it's a political matter as well. (For the record, I'm all for compassionate care of animals, which sometimes includes euthanasia. But I'm infinitely more committed to compassionate care for humans.)

If I lived in California, as a spiritually minded follower of Jesus, the killing of babies in the womb would matter to me, right into the voting booth. I would not be able to separate the gospel from politics when it came to pro-life action.

Or consider the issue of religious freedoms. It is true, of course, that the gospel can flourish in any setting or situation. But I would much rather bequeath religious liberty to my children and grandchildren than leave them with violent, state-sponsored persecution. I would much rather leave them with the ability to practice their faith without government intrusion or penalty. And much of that depends on politics.

In fact, as I have met with persecuted Christians in other parts of the world, they have expressed their hope to me that President Trump's strong leadership could provide a rebuke to their own government's actions. Elections do have consequences.

That's why many of the people of Hong Kong and Iran deeply appreciate Trump's public expression of solidarity. These are

issues of freedom vs. oppression as well.

Of course, it is absolutely true that the gospel must come first, as I have emphasized time and again. (Most recently, see, "Let the Politicians Focus on Politics While Pastors Focus on the Gospel.")

And it is true that, as followers of Jesus, we cannot become an appendage of a political party. (Sadly, we often fall short in this area.)

And, speaking more broadly, the words of Dr. King remain as relevant as ever. "The church," he said, "must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority."

Amen and amen.

At the same time, we must realize that, in many cases, the gospel and politics do intersect. The president's March for Life speech is a dramatic, important case in point.