

The Most Important Political Act Christians Can Undertake

How do you talk to a fish about water? Our immersion in certain realities is so total, so ubiquitous, that we are, paradoxically, unable to see them precisely because they are all we can see. In other words, a fish can't see water, because water is all a fish can see.

I am a fish who is trying to see water and talk to my fellow fish about it. The water I'm trying to see and discuss is our immersion in a particular cultural moment, wherein Christian allegiance to Christ is understood to necessarily entail a political allegiance to a certain party—Republican or Democrat—and an ideological allegiance to a certain “ism” such as conservatism or progressivism. I choose the word “allegiance” to describe the commitment we feel to our political parties and ideologies only because a stronger word escapes me. For many, it is simply a given that being a conservative who votes Republican or a progressive who votes Democrat is fundamentally constitutive of Christian faithfulness. As a result, we believe those who vote and think differently have not merely voted or thought differently; they have betrayed the faith, and ought to be treated as tax collectors and sinners, infidels and Philistines.

These are the waters in which we now swim, but it has not always been so—and more importantly, it must not remain so.

Shortly before my grandfather died, we sat watching news coverage of an election. At a certain point, my grandfather—as mild-mannered a Southern gentleman as one will find—sighed and said, “Over the years, I have voted for many Republicans, and I have voted for many Democrats, but it never occurred to me to think of myself as a Republican or a Democrat. And it certainly never occurred to me to think one party was good and

the other was evil. Something is different.”

My grandfather was right. Modern Americans may be very “spiritual” about our religion—favoring inward spiritual libertarianism to structured religious traditions—but we have become very “religious” about our politics. Too many see political allegiance as the primary outward expression of our faith.

For example, interracial marriage was mostly unthinkable 60 years ago, but now 90% of Americans support it. But let’s not celebrate our progress too much. A 2017 *New York Times* article pointed out that rising numbers of Americans now say they have a problem with interpolitical marriages, or marrying someone who belongs to a different political party. It seems our divisiveness has migrated from race to politics. We are quite happy to let our son marry a Black woman, but letting him marry a Democrat is a bridge too far.

People not only feel morally justified in their hatred of ideological opposites, but indeed feel such hatred is a moral obligation. This should not be. But lest I be misunderstood, let me preemptively say what I am not saying. Specifically, I am not saying three things.

Jesus Is Not Apolitical

I am not saying politics don’t matter.

When Jesus famously told us to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and render to God what is God’s, he was not plagiarizing Thomas Jefferson—advocating a strict separation between “church” and “state.” Jesus never said that God rules our hearts and then leaves the rest of the ruling to senators and secretaries of state. For as King David himself once reminded us, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1a, NIV). That means once we have rendered everything to God that is God’s, there is simply nothing left for Caesar.

Yet well-meaning people have inverted Jesus' words so as to make them mean the exact opposite of what they quite plainly mean. They imagine Jesus as the ancient equivalent of the modern "spiritual influencer," who inspires us with saccharine, encouraging messages and is apolitical in regard to all things political. "Jesus doesn't care about politics! Jesus is after our hearts!"

But this is blasphemy. Of course, Jesus cares about our politics, because Jesus is Lord of every square inch of creation. As Gerhard Lohfink reminds us, "God's care is not only for every individual, but for society. God cares not only for the soul, but also for matter, for culture, for history, for the whole makeup of the world. Everything is included in the feast of the new creation."

When Jesus told Pilate the kingdom of God is "not of this world," He wasn't playing possum, assuring Pilate he was no threat to earthly kings and queens because He was merely the "spiritual" king of a "spiritual" kingdom. Rome didn't bother to crucify spiritual kings of spiritual kingdoms. No, Rome crucified political threats—and make no mistake, Jesus of Nazareth was a political threat to the empire. It would probably not be too much to suggest that Jesus did eventually topple the Roman Empire.

In fact, our current cultural moment is exposing the impotence of the apolitical gospel. As God forces us to reckon more deeply with the sins of racial injustice in our nation's past and present, the church dare not "stay out of politics" or just "focus on the gospel," because an apolitical gospel that fails to proclaim the reconciliation of all races (and the justice commensurate with that reconciliation) through the death of Jesus the Messiah is a false, incomplete gospel (Eph. 2:14-16).

It would take many more articles to further explore the nature of faithful Christian political involvement, so for the

purposes of this article, let this be enough: Our understandable exhaustion with the partisan and complex nature of American politics is no excuse to betray the gospel by turning Jesus into the apolitical Savior of an apolitical people.

All Politics Are Not Equal

I am also not saying that all politics are more or less equal.

Can you imagine telling Martin Luther King Jr. that the politics of segregationist senators and Abraham Lincoln express a proportionate morality? Can you imagine telling Dietrich Bonhoeffer that Nazi politics are certainly bad, but we must remember there are relatively similar problems with all political parties?

When pushed, it's clear we know all politics are not equal. Even when modern America's narrow political options (Republican or Democrat) tempt us to become irresponsible political relativists, we must remember that politics embody a morality, so to be a political relativist is to be a moral relativist.

I am preaching to myself here, because the dreary choice between Republicans and Democrats is enough to make a political and moral relativist out of me. I admit there are ideological appetites at work in both parties I find not only troubling but loathsome. For starters, neither party is particularly pro-life, but rather selectively pro-life, which is to say both parties cherish the lives of certain ideologically elect people while disregarding the lives of the ideologically reprobate—whether that be a second-trimester fetus, a Black male or any foreigner who gets in the way of America's "interests."

Yet while the choice between Republican and Democrat can be bleak, there is far more to politics than voting red or blue in a national election. We must responsibly pursue societal

arrangements that best anticipate the justice, mercy and abundance of the kingdom of God in our actual, local communities.

Finally, I am not saying the cure for our political divisiveness is a collective move to the political center. The center has no stronger claim to truth than the right or left, just as we should not seek moderation in all things.

Jesus was certainly more extremist than moderate. He was a wild itinerant prophet who consorted with tax collectors and sinners. He told people to give when asked with no thought for the morrow. He blistered His opponents with rhetoric so hot it still radiates off the red letters. And He was murdered because He was deemed more dangerous than a violent insurrectionist named Barabbas. Jesus was not meek and mild, and modern Christians should remember that milquetoast moderation is not a beatitude.

A Scandalous Unity

So now that I've said what I'm not saying—that politics don't matter, both sides are the same and moderation is always right—I can finally begin, fellow fish, to describe the water in which we swim.

Have you ever wondered what it would take for the world to believe God sent Jesus? Would it take a sign in the sky, a Christian takeover of world governments or perhaps the perfect rational argument for the existence of God? What would it take for the world to believe God sent Jesus?

Here's what Jesus said in John 17:20-23 (NASB): "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they may also be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they

may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”

According to Jesus, the unity of His disciples determines the world’s capacity to believe God sent Him. In other words, our unity helps make the gospel believable.

Conversely, this means our disunity makes the gospel unbelievable. Our disunity is a stumbling block upon which the world cannot help but trip, and woe to those who are stumbling blocks.

Lohfink writes, “No one has ever seen God. ... What can be seen is only the church. If it is no longer one, but divided, the world can only indistinctly behold the mystery of Christ. The mirror is shattered. The division of the people of God makes it almost impossible for the world to believe.”

How is the world supposed to believe Jesus of Nazareth is powerful enough to destroy the barrier separating God from humanity when He is incapable of destroying the barriers separating conservative and progressive Christians?

Similarly, Saint Paul—not a meek and mild man himself—went so far as to remind us that our seditious reflexes are “unworthy” of our calling, no matter how skillful we justify them to ourselves. He writes, “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:1-6).

Missiologist David Fitch explains this as a call to move “beyond” our current ideological geography into the new spaces generated by the work of God in Christ. As alluded to earlier,

this move beyond ideology is not necessarily a compromise or a third, mediating way. It is not a call for those on the right and left to move toward the middle. It is rather a call to move up—an invitation into the elevation of the kingdom. Because in a viciously partisan culture, the most compelling witness we can offer the world is our Spirit-inspired and sustained commitment to a unity in Christ that transcends even our deepest ideological divisions. This is not a false veneer of superficial unity that minimizes the serious disagreements that exist and must be spoken and sorted. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that God in Christ has done something to unite us that is not dependent upon us.

All of this suggests our most important political act is to embody the politics of Jesus as a concrete people—an act impossible unless we are, in fact, the mismatched but unified family birthed from the waters of baptism. If the election results of Nov. 3 make everyone in our church rapturous or everyone in our church devastated, we might consider whether we have failed our most important political duty.

We need not always agree, nor pretend we do nor agree to never talk about it, but we must agree to agree with Jesus. We must agree that all our no's to each other have been swallowed up by His scandalously consolidating yes to us. From its inception, this has been the peculiar power of the gospel: it creates a diverse family where no family should exist.

This November, churches all over America will be exposed as either dens of worldly partisanship or beachheads of the kingdom of God. How will the American church acquit itself in this trial? I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful—hopeful the Spirit of God will lead us out of this partisan lagoon and into the infinite waters of our one baptism.

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