

Faith and Politics
Finding Our Way Through a Difficult Issue
Orchard Sunday
October 12 2008

Charles Drew (for distribution)

Introduction

Politics in our world tends to generate two unhelpful things: heat (rather than light) and sound bytes (rather than substance). The first of these divides us, the second insults us and leaves us as ignorant of the issues as we would be if no one had said anything. We want to try to demonstrate today that the church can offer a refreshing alternative to both heat and empty words. The church can be a place where thoughtful people, equally committed to the Bible's authority over the whole of life, can disagree about politics, sometimes deeply, but do so in love.

D) The Problem Facing Christians (or, two Christian obligations that seem to conflict):

How do we fulfill our obligation to be seriously engaged in public life (Jesus says that we are the world's "salt and light"—a preserving influence in, and the conscience of, the worlds we inhabit every day) without politicizing the church?

A) Every Christian must be salt and light: Jesus is the King, the Second Adam. Everything matters to him. For the disciple of Jesus to say that he or she is only (and properly) interested in "spiritual things" is a flat out denial of the Lordship of Christ.

All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me... (Matthew 28)

The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord—Lord of the world, Lord of the cosmos, Lord of the earth, of the ozone layer, of whales and waterfalls, of trees and tortoises. As soon as we get this right we destroy at a stroke the disastrous dichotomy that has existed in people's minds between "preaching the gospel" on the one hand and what used to be called loosely "social action" or "social justice" on the other. Preaching the gospel means announcing Jesus as Lord of the world; and, unless we are prepared to contradict ourselves with every breath we take, we cannot make that announcement without seeking to bring that lordship to bear over every aspect of the world. (N.T. Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said, Eerdmans, pp. 153-154).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him.¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1)

B) The church has unique and particular obligations

They are: (i) To pray for the coming of the Kingdom (Matthew 6), (ii) to evangelize and disciple the nations (Matthew 28), (iii) to form the new alternative society bound together in love under the headship of Christ (Ephesians 2) [Republicans and Democrats ought to be able to worship

together under the same roof], (iv) to demonstrate the presence of the King by deeds of mercy and justice (Acts 1:1,8).

If the church does not do these things, especially the first three, no one will. Stewardship demands that the church not be diverted from these principal tasks.

II) Some distinctions to help us with our dual obligation:

Note: There are no easy formulas

A) The distinction between theocracy and influence.

This is a subtle distinction, not always easy to make. But it is nevertheless important.

- 1) A theocracy is a human government that represents God in and before the world. Ancient Israel was a theocracy. With the resurrection and ascension of Christ to the right hand of God, where he now rules all nations, theocracy in the OT sense has ended. There is no longer one nation (or party) that “owns” God, and God no longer identifies himself with one nation (or one party). To have a “real Christian” in the White House is not to have God in the White House.
- 2) Allegiance to God’s new commonwealth comes not at the point of a literal sword, but at the transforming power of the “sword of the Spirit” (the Word) that is “sharper than any two-edged sword” and which issues from the mouth (not from the arm) of King Jesus.

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.... ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (Revelation 1)

¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4)

- 3) A theocracy, in other words, exists today, but it is of a different sort. It is the reign of King Jesus over all the nations, and it unfolds as the King, by the power of his Spirit and the preaching the gospel, subdues the inner lives of his elect so that they willingly follow him with all that they are. It is a mysterious kingdom, at once more free and more absolute than any kingdom that has ever existed. Stalin sought to create absolute allegiance by abolishing freedom of worship and thought, and murdering any who resisted him. Jesus calls for absolute allegiance but does not force it. Those who follow him do so with far greater fullness than anyone ever followed Stalin, but they do so because they freely choose to.

Our primary task is to do all that we can to enhance this new, international and internalized theocracy. This does not mean that we will never seek to legislate morality (after all, that is what everybody does), but we will do so with limited expectations and with restraint, knowing that the change that is needed most does not come at the point of a sword.

Consider the public debate over what constitutes legitimate marriage. Every Christian will rightly want to see the general culture rediscover and love God’s plan for marriage—

heterosexual, monogamous union energized by love. But a Christian may with biblical warrant argue that to enforce such a plan by law is to cave in to the theocratic impulse. [He may argue as well that it would be ineffective: The prohibition era did not see a decrease in drinking]

B) The distinction between the calling of the church and the calling of the individual believer.

1) The callings of the church we have already noted: (1) to evangelize and to disciple the nations, (2) to pray for the coming of the kingdom, (3) to demonstrate the victory of Christ in its unity (if Christians with deep political differences cannot love each other, who can? We have the cross and the Spirit), and (4) to demonstrate the presence of the King by deeds of mercy and justice. If the church does not do these things, especially the first three, no one will. Stewardship demands that the church not be diverted from these principal tasks.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28)

³ For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴ For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ... (2 Cor. 10)

⁹ Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt 6)

¹⁸ [P]ray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, ¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (Ephesians 6)

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Ephesians 2)

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." (Matthew 11)

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:10)

2) The "social" callings of individual Christians are as diverse as Christians are, rooted in gifting, opportunity and season of life. We must encourage one another, and give one another room, to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling..." (Phil 2:12). It is easy but wrong to

assume that the particular kingdom burdens that God has laid on my heart, and given me the means to carry, should be the same for you. Different gifts, different opportunities, and even different seasons of life call forth different obligations.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. (1 Corinthians 12)

²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' (Matthew 25)

"The tax code prohibits churches from participating or intervening in any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for public office. This is often called the "campaign" limitation. A church that violates this limitation "could lose its tax exempt status," the IRS cautioned in a 2004 news release." ("2005 Ministers' Tax Guide for 2004 Returns, PCA Retirements and Benefits, Inc., p. 8).

Scenarios in which politicizing compromises the unique mission of the church:

Unity:

Imagine a presentation on politics and faith at church that turns into a shouting match in which people impugn each other's motives. Imagine it dividing the church. Imagine it leading to the break up of your small group. Imagine not being able to pray together with someone you used to pray together with because you discover that they are on the other political side from you.

Imagine everyone at EPC suddenly adopting a "don't ask, don't tell" policy towards political discussion because they are so afraid of fighting.

Either of these scenarios would demonstrate that we have not yet discovered the cross's and the Holy Spirit's impact on human divisiveness. It would demonstrate that we have not yet learned to be the new supernatural people that Jesus died to create—that we still are like the world.

Evangelism/Discipling the nations:

Imagine an international visitor, a student from Syria, visiting your church at the invitation of some friends, and hearing praise from the pulpit over the war in Iraq. What would that person "learn" about Jesus the King?

Or imagine a non-believing business person, an ardent supporter of Barach Obama, who is open for the first time in his life to Christian faith because his professional and personal life is in crisis and he has been befriended by an interesting person who happens to be a believer. That person brings him to church. But as he walks in the door he encounters some literature on the welcome table that "smells" Republican and then hears something disparaging in the sermon about Senator Biden.

Or, imagine a post-doc, a McCain fan, returning to church for the first time in ages because she is beginning to despair over the direction and meaning of her life. She goes on line, discovers that

EPC is right next door to her, and so she walks in the door today. She stays for Orchard Sunday and during the presentation hears the pastor hoot over Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin in a manner that is disparaging towards the governor.

What might these people do? Perhaps they would look past the politics. But they also might just leave in frustration.

C) **The distinction between moral principle and political strategy**

The church has an obligation to proclaim what is morally true, even if such a proclamation is unpopular.

The church also has an obligation to protect the conscience of its people.

NB: The moment we move from advocacy of high moral principle to the question of how best to nudge the culture towards greater conformity to that principle, we enter the world of fallible human solutions—i.e., the realm of conscience. At that point the church needs to be a safe place for lots of different people

¹⁰ *Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14)*

Illustrations:

1. Marriage issues.

The moral principle: By God's design marriage is a lifetime monogamous heterosexual union fueled by love.

The political strategy: But should the church advocate and require all its people to advocate legislation or an amendment that defines marriage in traditional terms, thereby delegitimizing all other arrangements? Is that the only, or the best, way to advance the Biblical model in every setting? Christians living in Greenwich Village, for example, might with biblical warrant speak against a marriage amendment in part because they believe that advancing such an amendment not only will get them no where, but will also effectively isolate them from their gay neighbors—breaking off even the possibility of the transforming gospel of grace making its way through them to those neighbors. Christians need to be given freedom by the church to figure out for themselves, to discuss with each other and with others, the answer to this question.

2. Financial policy and the poor:

The moral principle: According to Romans 13, a nation has an obligation to promote what is good and just:

³ *For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13)*

This obligation no doubt extends to protecting the poor and the weak from those who would exploit and harm them. We can see this care illustrated in OT law. Gleaning laws, for example, required land-owners to leave the margins of their fields unharvested so that the poor could benefit from what was left. Perhaps the most remarkable law of all was that of the Jubilee year (never enacted!): every 50 years, all debts were to be canceled and all people returned to their ancestral land—a massive redistribution of wealth that guarded against the pattern of the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer over time.

While we are not free to mandate OT civic laws for our economy (no particular nation, remember, is any longer to be identified with God’s theocracy), we can allow such legislation to fire our imaginations as we wrestle with what it means to “love our neighbor as ourselves” in the way we structure our economy.

The political strategy: A practical question remains: What role does the government play in helping a society “love its neighbor.” Does the government mandate such love by legislating the redistribution of wealth, or does the government create structures (tax breaks, deregulation) that maximize the private sector’s freedom to love its neighbors. Should the government directly redistribute wealth for the sake of the poor, or should government get out of the way of churches, individuals, and businesses, so that they can find ways freely to assist the poor. Those on the right believe that unfettered economies self-correct and grow, creating a “rising tide that lifts all ships.” Those on the left argue that deregulation only allows greed to thrive at the expense of the poor.

3. Pro-life issues.

The moral principle: Human life is inherently precious and should be protected and preserved. Taking of human life, except in the case of a just war or (perhaps) following due process in the case of murder, or (perhaps) to preserve another human life, is therefore wrong.

The political strategy: Some argue that the only morally acceptable approach to abortion is to outlaw it and for that reason feel compelled to vote pro-life as a matter of first importance. Others, while they oppose the practice, argue that a more realistic political approach is to advance the sort of policies that will reduce the need for abortions—policies that they believe tend to be more Democratic than Republican. Some argue that, because abortion is so strikingly heinous, it should eclipse other issues. Others argue that killing is not the only social behavior forbidden by the Ten Commandments and that one’s voting should reflect a concern for the full range of what is forbidden. They also argue that permitting abortions is morally no worse (and perhaps even less heinous) than mandating the killing of Iraqis in what they perceive as an unjust war: one might vote either Democrat or Republican and be pro-life. [NB: Whatever we may think of these arguments, the church ought to be a place where we can safely discuss, even argue, over them. If the church can’t navigate the culture wars, who can?! We have the Spirit and the reconciling work of Christ!]

III) For whom do I vote?

A) Start first with yourself.

Ask, “What are my deepest desires for my country and are those consistent with my deepest allegiance (that is, to Christ)?” Do I, in other words, want most deeply what God wants? Or, do I

want something else? Is my agenda for America selfish, or is it Godly? As I think about who should be the next president am I thinking about who will make things most comfortable for me—or am I asking other sorts of questions:

Whose policies, gifts, and manner of governing will help me to be a better neighbor, and will help us as a nation to be a better neighbor to the nations of the world? Whose policies, gifts, and manner of governing will help us (as individuals and as a nation) care more for those who have fewer choices than we do (the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the unborn, the generations to follow)? Whose policies, gifts, and manner of governing will help us to take better care of the creation that God has entrusted to us? Whose policies, gifts, and manner of ruling will help the United States to be a more just nation, both domestically and internationally?

To ask these sorts of questions is not to suggest that there is an obvious political answer (there exist, as we have seen, different strategies for moving us towards the things that matter to Christ the King). It is, rather, to invite us to take a careful look at our motives. What is driving us: Is it fear or love? Is it a love for me or a love for justice? Is it self-protection or is it a zeal for what pleases the true king? Is it a compulsion to control or a confidence in God's trustworthiness? Is it a worship of America (or a version of America that has become too precious to me) or worship of Christ? Election years can be a very useful season for sorting through the idols of our own hearts.

B) Then move to the candidates.

How do we do this?

1) First, we may need to adjust our expectations:

If we are prone to cynicism, we remember that God is good and just. He hears the prayers and notes the faithful efforts of those who long for what is good and just in the place where they live:

Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray for the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (Jer. 29:7)

If we are prone to too much enthusiasm, we may need to adjust our expectations downward. No candidate in this fallen world will be perfect. None will be able to deliver fully on what he promises, however sincerely those promises are made. None will hold consistently to all that is dear to God. None will know infallibly the best way to bring forth what is dear to God—even if he consistently wanted to.

Put not your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help (Psalm 146:3)

2) Second, we will keep at least four things in mind as we wrestle with how to vote:

(i) Character: Are there any significant character issues that should concern me (this is not to demand perfection, but it is to value integrity). Does the candidate's decisions in his personal life give grounds for believing that he can be trusted to do, under pressure, what he has promised? Does the candidate respect the law of the land (does he pay taxes), does he wield power with humility, does he keep good company, does she listen to those who disagree, does she admit when she is wrong or mistaken, is his family life in order, does she model contentment and love?

Godliness with contentment is great gain...But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare...For the love of money is the root of all evil. (1 Timothy 6:6,9,10)

⁴ It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, ⁵ lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. (Proverbs 31)

⁴ Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel; ⁵ take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness. (Proverbs 25)

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6)

⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? (1 Timothy 3)

(ii) Gifts/proven ability. A candidate may believe in all the “right” things, but he may not have the God given gifts for governing. Can he actually lead? Has she proven to be effective?

⁹ Three things are stately in their tread; four are stately in their stride: ³⁰ the lion, which is mightiest among beasts and does not turn back before any; ... and a king whose army is with him. (Proverbs 30)

²⁸ In a multitude of people is the glory of a king, but without people a prince is ruined. (Proverbs 14)

(iii) Articulated positions: What does the candidate says he/she stands for (we need to do our homework and be sure that we are clear about the candidate’s positions)? For policy information check <http://www.scribd.com/doc/4916154/McCain-vs-Obama-on-the-Issues-081308>

(iv) Actual record: What is the candidate’s actual record? We need to find out what the candidate has actually done, how he/she has actually voted on the issues that he says he stands for; and we need to understand, should there be a discrepancy, what the reasons for it are.

A suggested exercise, with respect to items (iii) and (iv):

- Take note of (1) what policies the candidate formally stands for, and (2) what the candidate’s actual record is.
- Note any discrepancies between (1) and (2) and try to find out why the discrepancy exists (this will help you test the character of the person).
- Line the candidates’ actual record up alongside the law of God, particularly as it bears on our relationships to one another and our stewardship of the creation.

³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer..⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. ⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not

murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Romans 13)

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people. (Proverbs 14:34)

⁶ "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58)

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. (Psalm 24:1)

And God saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

Command	Candidates			
	McCain		Obama	
	Stand	Record	Stand	Record
Doing justice and advancing fairness				
Treating the opposition with honor and respect				
Caring for the poor				
Liberating the oppressed				
Valuing life				
Advancing honesty and transparency				
Caring for creation				

+++++

Further Thoughts on the Question of Abortion:

Abortion is such a terrible crime (the legal destruction of defenseless children) that it dwarfs virtually every other issue for many Christians. Should not, therefore, a candidate's position on this issue be determinative in the voting decision of a Christian?

Response:

It is right to admit to how frightful this social policy is. It is a terrible crime, repeated at such a level of magnitude that it is not possible to comprehend it adequately. Far more unborn children have been killed in our country than Jews in the holocaust and Russian citizens under Stalin. And the victims of abortion have absolutely no recourse. They are brought to the place of death without any power whatsoever to escape, like children brought to the ovens at Auschwitz—only worse because some of the children selected for execution found ways to escape. It flies in the face of “true religion” which James defines as “visiting orphans and widows in their distress”, standing against a long and deep Biblical tradition of advocacy for the defenseless.

Should it dwarf every other issue and make one-issue voters out of us? Not all Christians think it does.

- 1) **Other issues exist.** As terrible as abortion is, some argue that we cannot allow it to eclipse every other issue. Life is not the only social value in the Bible. Justice, concern for the poor, humility, truth telling (consider the Ten Commandments) occupy a place in the Decalogue of equal importance.
- 2) **Other pro-life concerns:** Abortion is not the only arena in which the defense of life is at stake. Policies that diminish provisions for the poor can have mortal consequences. Many feel that the war in Iraq, which has led to the death of many (civilians, not just soldiers), was without justification. What is the moral difference, they ask, between killing a child with a bomb and killing a child with a scalpel? To vote “pro-life” for many in the last election meant to vote both for and against the present administration.
- 3) **The question of effectiveness.** Honest differences of opinion exist over the best way to reduce abortions. Some feel that the best strategy is the direct (legislative) one—which involves electing a President that will be likely to appoint the sort of Supreme Court Justices who will be apt to overturn rule that Roe v. Wade on the grounds that it wrongly removed the abortion question from the people—a question that should be sent back to the state and/or federal legislatures to decide. Some feel that this “direct” approach is not as certain as it sounds (Who knows for sure what stand a judge will take? And who knows for sure what stand a legislative body will take, should the abortion question make its way back to that branch of government?), and that it leaves unaddressed the concerns for the women involved. They believe that the more effective approach is the indirect one—that is, to elect people who will promote the sort of social policies that will reduce the need for abortions by making it easier for women with unwanted or unexpected pregnancies to carry their children to term.
- 4) **Exodus 21:22-24:** Some argue that this text distinguishes between violence leading to the death of an unborn child and violence leading to the death of the child's mother. The punishment in the first instance (payment) is less than the punishment in the second (death), thereby suggesting a distinction between the rights of the pre-born and the rights of the “post-born.” I find this conclusion difficult exegetically (the text is ambiguous), and the application of the case to abortion even more difficult (in Ex 21 the death to the unborn child is an accidental result of violence to the mother, whereas in abortion the death to the unborn child is deliberate—two very different ethical situations). But I find I must respect the consciences of those who conclude that the text may be read and applied in this way.