

NAVIGATING POLITICS IN THE CHURCH

Brent Burckart, August 2024

Sadly, in recent years, we have seen how many of the political and cultural divisions in our broader culture have found their way into our churches, and the effects have been devastating, not only to our unity but also to our gospel witness. With the upcoming election, our churches and our leadership as pastors will once again be put to the test. To help us navigate this turbulent political environment, here are some general reminders that we can offer to our congregations, along with some specific suggestions for us as pastors as we seek to lead our churches well in the days ahead.

GENERAL REMINDERS FOR CHRISTIANS

1. Remember your true King.

It is Jesus whom we ultimately serve and in whom we put our trust (1 Tim. 1:17), not any human being or political party (Ps. 20:7). Because God is sovereign over our lives and over the rise and fall of nations and kings (Dan. 2:20-21; Prov. 21:1), we need not panic regardless of who sits in the Oval Office or the halls of Congress (Psalm 46).

2. Remember your true homeland.

We are citizens of a heavenly kingdom, even though we now live as exiles in an earthly one (Phil. 3:20-21). Though our true citizenship is in heaven, we must seek to advance the welfare of this earthly kingdom in which we now find ourselves, praying for, serving, and showing respect for its people and its institutions (Jer. 29:7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:11-17).

3. Remember your true mission.

We are ambassadors of our heavenly homeland sent with a message of reconciliation from our King (2 Cor. 5:18-21). Our primary calling is to make disciples of Jesus, not to effect political change (Matt. 28:18-20).

4. Remember your true enemy.

Human beings (including those who differ from us politically) are not the enemy. Our true enemy is Satan (Eph. 6:12). Human beings who stand in opposition to the gospel and a biblical worldview are merely pawns and slaves of the enemy just like we once were (2 Cor. 4:4). This should evoke within us a spirit of compassion rather than a spirit of condescension or condemnation. We are called to respond to those who oppose us with love and kindness (Luke 6:27-29; Rom. 12:17-21).

5. Remember your true power.

Our most powerful weapons are spiritual, not political (Eph. 6:10-20). It is the gospel of Jesus that ultimately has the power to effect life change, spiritual revival, and cultural renewal (Rom. 1:16, Acts 19:23-27).

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR PASTORS

1. Don't confuse American rights with Christian rights.

"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are important human rights set forth in the Declaration of Independence. I'm very grateful to live in a country that upholds and defends these rights. However, it's important to recognize that while life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are set forth as guaranteed rights in our nation's founding documents, nowhere are they regarded as guaranteed rights for Christians in Scripture. To the contrary, while we must actively defend the rights of others, as Christians, we ourselves must always be willing to lay down our lives, our liberty, and our comfort for the sake of the gospel (Luke 9:22-25; 1 Cor. 9:19-23; Phil. 2:3-8).

It was this inability to distinguish between American rights and Christian rights that lay at the heart of so many of the conflicts in our churches during the pandemic. Consider, for instance, the debates within churches regarding whether they should require, or at least recommend, the wearing of masks in church gatherings. Many church attendees in the pro-mask camp were essentially arguing for their right to life ("my life and health shouldn't be put at risk because of the choices of others") while many in the anti-mask camp were essentially arguing for their right to liberty ("my freedom shouldn't be restricted by the demands of others"). Though they were on opposite sides of the argument, what many in both camps had in common was their unwavering (and very American!) insistence on their own personal rights. What was often missing from the conversation was how our church's mask policies could be crafted in such a way as to best advance the gospel in our specific communities, regardless of our own personal opinions on the matter or the risks to our own personal life, liberty, or pursuit of happiness.

We must help our congregations understand that our gospel mission always takes priority over our personal rights and that winning souls is more important than winning arguments. This kind of selfless, humble, missional mindset is especially important in an election season.

2. Don't confuse specific legislative policies with broad biblical principles.

We must learn to speak on any given issue with the same degree of volume and specificity that God's Word does, no more and no less. Where the Bible is silent on an issue, we should be silent. Where the Bible speaks loudly and clearly on an issue, we should speak just as loudly and clearly. And on those issues where the Bible sets forth a general principle that allows for a variety of obedient applications, we must grant that same liberty. What this means in relation to politics is that as Christians, while we must agree at the level of biblical principle, we may have legitimate disagreements at the level of legislative policy. For instance, we should all agree that abortion is an unspeakable evil and that the life of the unborn should be protected. But there may well be legitimate disagreements among Christians regarding which specific legislative policies will best accomplish that end, not just in the short-term but over the long-term. In areas like this, it is generally best to teach biblical principles rather than advocate for specific policies and to teach your people *how* to think rather than *what* to think. We must model and encourage a Romans 14 kind of loving humility that refuses to cast judgment on those who are sincerely seeking to uphold the same biblical principles as we are, even though they may be advocating for different legislative policies.

3. Don't confuse the world of social media with the real world.

The world of social media is not the real world. It's a world driven by algorithms and inhabited by people, most of whom don't live in your community, many of whom are angry, and some of whom aren't even real people at all! So, if you are allowing the political, cultural, and theological debates that are going on in the virtual world to set the agenda for your ministry and determine the content of your preaching, you are most likely talking right past the real people who are actually attending your church. And if you allow the tone of internet outrage to seep into your preaching, you will needlessly offend people and hinder their spiritual growth. Unlike social media personalities who can just carelessly rant against liberalism or illegal immigration or homosexuality or abortion with seeming impunity, you don't have that luxury as a pastor. Why? Because you're not speaking to the virtual masses, you're speaking to real people—people who show up to your church at all different points on their spiritual journey, some of whom are illegal immigrants, some of whom struggle with same-sex attraction, some of whom have had abortions, and most of whom are too spiritually immature to even begin to understand how their faith should inform their politics. They don't need a rant. They need the gospel. They need the truth, but they need it delivered with a healthy dose of love. They need a pastor who will patiently and graciously shepherd them through their sin and their struggles toward the kind of hope and meaningful life change that only Jesus can provide. As pastors, we must steward our influence very carefully, not just from our sanctuary platform, but from our social media platforms as well.

2 Timothy 2:23-26 Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. ²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

4. Don't confuse calling out problems with actually solving problems.

In the past, Christians have been pretty good at calling out the shortcomings of our leaders and the evils in society at large, and there is a place for that. As Christians, we do function as the conscience of our country. But if all we do is decry and protest and boycott things, we will only come to be seen as the fly in the ointment rather than as the healing balm itself that our country so desperately needs.

So, we would do well to look for ways to be involved in actually solving some of the practical problems that our country is facing. For instance, we should engage with our local politicians and school principals, not primarily to lodge complaints but to extend to them our appreciation, our prayers, and our practical assistance. We should seek to attack poverty and hunger in our communities by partnering with local agencies to provide basic necessities and job assistance for those in need. We should serve the immigrants in our midst by offering ESL and citizenship classes. We should help mothers in crisis choose life for their unborn babies by volunteering at crisis pregnancy centers and being actively involved in adoption and foster care. We should vote for good candidates and even encourage our church members to run for office so that there is a faithful gospel presence wherever important decisions are made, from the local homeowner's association all the way up to the highest levels of government. This is not a social gospel. It is living out the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:16: *"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."* We do not seek influence for the sake of political power. We do not do good deeds to merely make the world a better place. We do these things so that people will be drawn to the good news of Jesus, experience His transforming power, and give glory to our Father in heaven. He is the ultimate solution to all that ails this world, and the best thing we can do for our troubled country is to point people to Him in both word and deed.