MARINERSCHURCH

POLITICS

The Church's public witness and proactive role in meeting society's needs is one of the oldest documented facts in Christian history. In the 360s, Emperor Julian complained about Christian activity within the Roman Empire because their activity was making the Roman leaders look bad among the people: "For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us."[1]

Unlike the early Church and many Christians today in other parts of the world, we have the great privilege in the United States to help shape society through our political system. While nearly everyone would agree that it is Christlike to care about people being treated rightly and that Christian values should influence our social and political activity, there is great debate—and often sharp division—among Christians over how our faith impacts political involvement.

THANKFUL FOR AMERICA, THANKFUL FOR DEMOCRACY

God created all people, determining when and where they would live (Acts 17:26). In His wisdom and providence, He placed Mariners Church where she is—in the United States of America. We are thankful for the religious liberties we enjoy, the opportunities this country provides, and the men and women who have contributed to this freedom.

We are thankful for democracy because "it reflects the paradox of our humanness. On the one hand, it takes the creation seriously (that is, human dignity), because it refuses to govern human beings without their consent and insists instead on giving them a responsible share in the decision-making process. On the other hand, it takes the fall seriously (that is, human depravity), because it refuses to concentrate power in the hands of one person or a few people."[2] Because we live in a democratic republic, we enjoy the privilege of participating in political activity, and we encourage Christians to do so. Because we have the proclivity to take gifts and make them our gods, we must guard against political involvement becoming political idolatry. We have no king but Jesus and He is the only One who should have our hearts. We advocate for political involvement and teach against political idolization.[3]

A FRAMEWORK FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

1. Christian ethics transcends political affiliation.

The early Christians were a minority without any political power, yet they radically impacted society because of their convictions and their compassionate action. According to historian Larry Hurtado, Christians in Rome during the first century acted against infanticide, stood for a sexual ethic between a man and a woman, served the poor, welcomed people from all ethnicities, and were kind to those who disagreed with them.[4] The early Christians cared for these issues because God cares and has addressed them in His Word. God still cares for people affected by these issues, and most would agree that they don't fit cleanly into one party in the current American political system.

2. Serving our communities often includes political action.

The early Christians did not engage in these issues through political means because they did not have the ability to do so. As Christians living in a democratic republic, we are free to allow our biblical convictions to inform our political actions. We are thankful for the examples from church history where Christians acted politically because of their love for God and people. For example, Christians built hospitals to care for the sick and worked to abolish slavery because they believed all people bear God's image.

3. There is a difference between principles and policies.

William Temple, in his well-respected book *Christianity and the Social Order*, made an important distinction between principles and programs/policies. He advocated that "the Church is concerned with principles, not

policy" because a local church's expertise and contribution to a community is not in the realm of policy.[5] A local church should teach all that God teaches about the principles impacting humanity without becoming driven by policies or politics. At the same time, a local church should encourage and equip individual Christians who serve in the realm of politics and policies.

4. Political differences are respected, and unity in Jesus is beautiful.

Faithful Christians may have different views on topics like spiritual gifts, church government, and eschatology or "last things" and can joyfully worship and serve alongside one another in the same church. The same is true with differing political viewpoints. Jesus pulled people into His small band of disciples who were very different politically (Simon the Zealot fought against Rome and Matthew the tax collector worked for Rome). Their unity was based on Jesus and His work for them. Likewise, our unity points to the power of the gospel and the nature of God (John 17:20–21). Being with people who are different from us serves to highlight our unity in Christ and to sharpen us (Prov 27:17). We are thankful that Jesus is the source of our unity at Mariners Church and not one's affiliation with a political party.[6]

5. We should care for all God cares for.

Christians may vote differently based on "single issues" with a clear conscience. A person might vote according to biblically-informed convictions on one issue while another person votes differently after considering other biblical convictions. A broken world includes broken systems with imperfect solutions; this should bring about humility and thoughtfulness rather than arrogance or apathy. Scott Sauls addresses online sociopolitical tension among the Body of Christ with the following wisdom: "While it is fine for Christian to be a single-issue voter, it's not fine to be a single-issue Christian."[7] We should care about the things we know God cares about, according to His Word. We should care about people as God cares about them (Rom 8:19–21; Matt 22:36–40).

SO WHERE IS MARINERS?

Our purpose as a local church is to "inspire people to follow Jesus and fearlessly change the world." We seek to graciously point people to Jesus, but we also seek to serve the world as Jesus has served us. This means that Mariners should be a culture of people who do not fit comfortably into the social or political categories of society—Jesus prayed that all who believe in Him would be "in the world" but "not of the world," "sanctified by the truth." (John 17:14–19)

Therefore, we teach on issues as they are presented in Scripture, knowing that God's Word stands above all political parties. The gospel is spiritual and physical as "the kingdom of heaven has come near" in the incarnation of Jesus. (Matt 10:7) A holistic gospel and a biblical theology reveal that God's plan of salvation is not only one of escaping Earth for eternal life in Heaven when we die, caring only about spirituality, morality, or charity, but rather it is one of Him coming to Earth, caring about all of those things and more, so that we might begin to experience abundant life even now as we follow Jesus and join the work of His Kingdom.

According to Christ, God's will for our lives can be summarized in the following commands: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matt 22:37–40)

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The aim of Mariners Church is to be biblical, which means addressing whatever Scripture addresses, not only in response to recent events, but proactively, believing that God's Word is timeless, always relevant, always true, and always good. The following are helpful points and questions to carefully consider when framing a theological foundation to root our practice of political engagement as a local church.

1. Human authority originates in God's authority.

In his letter to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul instructs Christians to "submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God" (Rom 13:1). God is a God of peace and order, not disorder and chaos (1 Cor 14:33). This is the first thing the Bible reveals to us about God, the world, and our relation to both—God creates an orderly world and then shares His authority with human beings, blessing and commanding man and woman to fill the Earth and rule over it (Gen 1).

2. Authority is intended for our flourishing.

The passages in Romans 13 and Genesis 1 & 2 go on to explain that "dominion" and "governing authorities" are part of God's design for flourishing in the world. In both texts, human authority over nature and governmental authority over citizens are explained in terms of servants of God reflecting His image in the world and doing His good work. Biblical, God-honoring authority is an act of service and sacrifice for the good of others, like Christ who came to serve, not to be served (Matt 20:25–28).

3. Jesus was the perfect citizen, but also the true King.

Fully God and fully man, Jesus lived within the cultures of His day, observed customs, and ultimately submitted to the government by willingly laying down His life even though He could not be found guilty of any wrong (Luke 2:51–52; John 18:28–19:16; Phil 2:5–11). His submission did not mean obedience to human authority that went against God's will. When faced with execution, Jesus reminded the political leader threatening His life that "You would have no authority over me at all… if it hadn't been given you from above" (John 19:11). Therefore, we as followers of Christ can give our entire lives to God and to His Kingdom, while giving to "Caesar" what is due to a position of authority or to the order of society (Mark 12:17).

4. We live out our faith as ambassadors for His Kingdom.

"Faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself," because we show our faith by our works (Jas 2:17). For example, if while saying God cares for the needs of people, we do nothing to help others in need, we do not truly believe that He will care for us either. God accomplishes most, but not all, of His work through His people, not through a miracle of divine intervention. We are citizens and ambassadors of the Kingdom of Heaven while living on this Earth, revealing our love and respect for God in the way that we love and respect others, including human authority (1 Pet 2:9–17). Most specifically, our desire is expressed in the prayer Jesus taught His disciples: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10).

5. The abuse of human authority cannot go on forever.

Sin affects everything. When God created all things and declared them good, there was order. When humanity rebelled against God's authority, that order broke down in every realm. Since the fall of man, everything has been corrupted, including human relationships and therefore human authority (Gen 3). Jesus experienced the unjust abuse of power in His crucifixion. When Peter and Paul wrote the letters referenced above, the infamous Nero ruled the empire and would soon persecute Christians. Though not in their own lifetimes, since Peter and Paul would both be executed, the Roman Empire would fall and be replaced by other forms of government. God's people sometimes suffer for a time under ungodly authority, yet He will not allow sin and oppression to continue forever. He calls people to action to make things right. The Lord's words to Moses before liberating the Israelites from slavery remind us of His sovereignty: "I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt, and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors. I know about their sufferings, and I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them from that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod 3:7–8). Similarly, Christians were given a vision of future hope when Christ would return to establish His Kingdom and Heaven and Earth would be united in a holy city where all things are made right again… forever (Rev 21–22).

HOW WE ENCOURAGE MARINERS CHURCH TO ENGAGE POLITICALLY

1. Remember that our first allegiance is to Jesus and His Kingdom.

We will not be defined or divided by politics. Instead, we remain united in Christ. While political engagement is an important part of our lives—one of many ways that we seek to love our neighbors as ourselves—it is not the most important part of our lives. In Christ, the wall of division was torn down, making His people one (Eph 2:14). Christian unity among different people is an unavoidable part of the New Testament—we have more in common through Christ than we have separating us. He has made us family. Jesus said that when we seek first His Kingdom, then all of our needs will be provided by our Heavenly Father (Matt 6:33).

In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, various elements of spiritual warfare are considered through a series of fictitious letters between demonic beings seeking to sabotage the faith of a new Christian. In the seventh letter, a diabolical shift is described where political views are one thing shaped by a person's faith, then those views become the most important thing in the person's faith, and finally, faith becomes just one thing shaped by that person's politics. It doesn't matter which partisan stance they adopt, as long as their religion becomes a means to an end, merely providing support for their preferred cause. "Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing." The demonic strategy relies on a basic principle of idolatry: "All extremes, except extreme devotion to [God], are to be encouraged."[8]

For too many this is true: politics become an idol and false hope. Trusting anything other than Jesus will ruin us. Therefore, we must repent whenever we are more passionate about politics than about Christ and His Kingdom. We must repent of viewing people with different political views as enemies. We must repent of living as if there is an enduring city here, rather than a glorious future home with Christ and people from every tribe, tongue, and nation worshiping the King (Heb 11:10; Rev 7:9–10).

2. Be convinced and kind.

As difficult as it is to navigate political opinions, news, and misinformation, we can be sure of our biblical convictions, including our commitment to Christlikeness in the way we engage with others in conversations and in the political process (Matt 10:16). Posture is key, especially across lines of disagreement. Remember, while all Christians share core convictions regarding our faith in Jesus, there may be significant differences in convictions about how to best live out our faith when it comes to political engagement. In matters that involve clear, biblical principles, Christians should engage in and encourage robust, healthy debate in order to translate those principles into policy. In matters that are less clear, kindness toward others must be coupled with personal convictions.

We know that conviction and kindness are both possible, not only because of the example of Christ and the abiding of His Spirit within us, but the early Church dealt with major differences in how to apply their new faith to practical matters. One example was Paul's counsel to Roman Christians who were divided over strong convictions about whether or not it was appropriate to eat meat or drink wine from markets where vendors believed in the blessing of idols over the food and their businesses. Paul told the Christians to stop judging one another over those matters of personal conscience and to promote peace among each other (Rom 14). In instances like the one Paul addressed (where a biblical command is not explicit), Christians could and should be convinced in their own minds while also being kind to their brothers and sisters who hold different—even opposite—convictions on how to put their faith into action.

We too can be convinced and kind at the same time. It is easy to be convinced and not be kind, and it is easy to be kind and not be convinced. But to be both convinced and kind takes maturity.[9]

3. Engage more than politically.

Political engagement is a privilege that can be stewarded as servants of God to seek the welfare of our cities (Jer 29:7). But while politics are a powerful tool in loving our neighbors as ourselves, this is just one of many ways we can serve our communities and live out our faith. In addition to political engagement, we want to personally serve others—using our time, resources, abilities, and relationships to bless the community.

Christians in Rome were committed to a counter-cultural sexual ethic, to caring for people of all ethnicities, serving the poor, and rescuing children who would be killed by infanticide. Our political voice should not make us complacent in finding ways, outside of politics, to care for all the Lord cares about. We should engage politically because we can, but we can and must engage more than politically.

A FINAL WORD

Augustine was once asked about the steps toward Christian maturity and virtuous wisdom. His reply was profoundly simple: "This way is first humility, second humility, third humility."[10] We'd be wise to apply those steps toward our views on politics and our interactions with others inside and outside of the Church. It's not just possible, it's probable, that we'll learn from those who see things differently than we currently do. We may disagree on how to best put our faith into action, but to follow Jesus literally means to put our faith into action—we can all agree on that. However we vote or engage politically, may we all seek to inspire people to follow Jesus and fearlessly change the world.

Endnotes

1 Letter 22 from *The Works of the Emperor Julian, volume III*. Loeb Classical Library, 1913.

2 Stott, Dr. John R.W.., Wyatt, John. *Issues Facing Christians Today: 4th Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 41.

3 For a thorough examination of political involvement and idolatry, see David T. Koyzis' *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019)

4 Hurtado, Larry W.. *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Marquette University Press, 2016)

5 Temple, William. *Christianity and Social Order.* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1956)

6 For an overview of different perspectives on political engagement held by Christians, see *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, part of the Counterpoints series by Zondervan, 2015.

7 Scott Sauls, **https://twitter.com/scottsauls/status/1320060512533610497?s=20&t=WRPqO6fr4QE0a1FMl3I2jA**

8 Lewis, C. S.. *The Screwtape Letters: Annotated Edition. Letter VII.* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2013)

9 For a short-but-meaningful read on how to engage in the public square with Christlikeness, see Vincent E. Bacote's *The Political Disciple: A Theology of Public Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015)

10 Augustine, *Letter* 118.