

## **Christian Spirituality: Christ-centered, Not Co-opted by Political Powers**

I write to fellow leaders who desperately want to know the good and to have the insight and power to be doers of the good in our contemporary world. I write striving to please God in my calling as a Christian leader. But I find that commitment to be challenged by contemporary political realities. I am daily buffeted by rival powers who articulate competing visions of the good life.

Finding such capacity to please God in our callings and do good is possible. We simply need to make our way back to fundamentals in order to find specifics to walk faithfully through the storm of contemporary political realities.

### **Politics and Christian Spirituality**

Politicians want money, votes and power. Ideally, while needing to fight the temptations of money, power, and various forms of compromise, the church wants to please God. And through divine power, the church already has everything we need for a godly life, everything we need to fulfill our calling (2 Peter 1.3). Thus we don't have to anxiously strive as if we lack power or some other important resource. To participate fruitfully in civic discourse we don't need to beg for something off the table of political power brokers.

When the church is being her best self, free from the disordered or confused desires, and focused on pleasing God, there will be a divergence of wants and needs between the political and ecclesial spheres. There will be an inherent tension between the values and practices of politics and that of Christian spirituality. They rarely square up. Most of the time they don't even harmonize well.

There are a couple key reasons for this. First, politicians and Christians have—or should have—differing visions of ultimate things: the true, the good, the righteous, and the just. Second, the current relationship between the church and politics is rooted in mutually using each other. Once we get in the habit of using others, no matter how spiritual the rationale sounds, we have set a course away from Jesus-centered spirituality. He never used others for his kingdom-ends. Why? Because Jesus lived in a reality of God-bathed love. He...

*knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.*

John 13:3

The personal knowledge that Jesus possessed meant he never needed anything outside of the provision of his Father. This freed him to such an extent that he never had to manipulate or use others. It would have never crossed his mind.

Such relational reliance is the grounding norm and source of confidence for the Christians in all civic interactions.

## **The Supremacy of Jesus In Public Life**

Engaging any aspect of civic life requires allegiance to another person—God; his alternative reality, and his coming world. Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:20). Jesus' *supremacy* over all powers, authorities, and possible outcomes is what makes him a *Savior* worthy of our fullest confidence in him—his way, his truth, and life—his manner of living. This kind of confidence in Jesus makes possible our ultimate loyalty to him. Our trust in Jesus' kingdom-of-God agenda provides the basis for our political engagement.

Jesus transcends and thus evaluates every other form of human belonging—especially political ideology and political parties. When we commit to the preeminence of the Son in whom all the fullness—the love, wisdom, power and provision—of God dwells (Colossians 1:15–20), it does not solve every problem or make every specific decision. Public policy is really complex and difficult. What the supremacy of Christ does is give us an orientation for navigating the messiness of civic life. It keeps us in God's story, freeing us from politicians' competing counter-narratives, and anchoring us to our True King.

The supremacy of Christ allows us to have confidence that this election is a drop of water in the ocean of God's intention to renew creation. Living in the kingdom, we conduct life on the Rock, not on the shifting sands of an election cycle. The security of the Rock allows us to be those who strive for justice, to be steady seekers of the good, and to act as agents of repair—both in the conduct of our lives and with our votes.

## **God's Church**

Politicians do not get to use the church. It is not a tool to be used in a political strategy. The church is already spoken for. The church has its own transcendent, non-partisan, good-for-all agenda. So no one—politicians or priests—gets to do anything with the church except that which conforms to and harmonizes well with God's intention for it.

The church's life is indexed to one singular telos: faithfulness to Jesus' kingdom agenda.

Yet, with all the problems and traps associated with political engagement, the church needs to stay present to the broken world precisely as a form of our fidelity to God, to his calling on the church to be agents of healing. We must do so with specific aims, biblical values, and agape-based practices.

## **No Escape**

We cannot escape political life. The Essene sect at Qumran tried to do so in Jesus' time. Jesus had to challenge their escapism because the work of God's kingdom is public. It is among named people who live in specific, concrete forms of our fallen world. Escapism is spiritually dysfunctional because, as Dallas Willard [points out](#), human beings are situated in a world structured by small and large systems of hidden powers. We cannot avoid them.

Instead of escaping from these powers, Christians have historically served their neighbors as various kinds of civil servants. Our civic calling as Christians is to recognize the existence of social principalities and powers and, as servants, to intelligently work against them by relying upon the Kingdom of God. Against fallen social powers, we are to seek dignity, love, and provision for everyone.

### **Engagement Without Fear**

In order to serve out of love, and in recognition of real principalities and powers averse to this kind of service, we have to be wary of fear. We do not want our engagement with political life to be motivated by fear. In any arena of human life, fear is a very bad master. Fear is a present temptation because we are told now in every election cycle that some person or some idea is an existential threat. This is meant to scare us, and thus manipulate us. Against this barrage of political shenanigans, a freeing truth stands before us:

*Your life is hidden with Christ in God.*  
Colossians 3:3

The problem with making a politician or an election an existential threat is that it calls for a hostile, anything-goes response, like that of a cornered raccoon who will shed whatever blood it takes to stop the threat, to survive.

Is that how we want to treat our neighbors who are Democrats or Republicans or Independents?

Let's apply a core teaching of Jesus to our political moment:

*And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?  
Is anything worth more than your soul?*  
(Matthew 16:26, NLT)

What if playing the existential game of politicians, doing whatever it takes to get a political win, is the true existential threat? Are we willing to lose our soul for electoral victory?

Yet the political operatives, seeking to politicize the church, continue to scream:

*We are in the war of our lifetime!*

Does *war* imply that we should hate and kill our neighbors for political victory?

Jesus would ask: Are you sure you want to do that? As he taught: *A person may get everything in the whole world for himself. But if he loses his life [his soul], it will not be any good for him. There is nothing that a person can give to get back his life [his soul]* (Matthew 16:26, EASY).

When politicians lie, flip-flop, manipulate, say whatever it takes to get elected, bully the system, and dehumanize their opponents, they are losing their soul. Let's not follow their example of fear in the process of an election and fear for the results.

## **One Throne**

The church resists being co-opted by political powers through knowing that the Oval Office is not a throne. Nor is the Speakership of the House or the Majority Leader of the Senate. God owns and resides upon the only true throne in the universe, and...

*To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb,  
be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and forever.*  
Rev. 5:13

In any election cycle or social moment, this is our vision: The church is spoken for. She is dedicated and devoted to the One Who Sits On The Throne. This *devotion* provides *orientation*: the church is one defined by and oriented to the love of Christ and love of neighbor and enemy. Christian leadership aligns the life of the church to God's purpose for it. Setting our compass in that direction keeps the church engaged, but on God's terms. We are freed from fear and freed to love and serve our God and others in the name of Jesus.