

You have heard it said there are two subjects we should never discuss in public - religion and politics. For the next couple of weeks, I would like to talk about both. Call me crazy (you wouldn't be the first) but two of the most impactful subjects in life should not be left out of the conversation. Let's start with politics.

In just over four months Americans will take to the polls to elect a new president. Are you excited? I didn't think so. I don't know if there has ever been a presidential election featuring two candidates with higher unfavorability ratings. In spite of his recently publicized pow-wow with evangelical leaders, unfavorability is one category that Donald Trump seems to be leading Hillary Clinton in the polls. And it is no small feat to be less favorable than someone who is unfavorable to over half the electorate. Hillary Clinton's rating is 54% compared to Donald Trump's 63%. **That means that the unfavorable candidate who gets elected will be the favorable choice because they are slightly less unfavorable than the more unfavorable candidate.** It also means that there are more people who would prefer not to vote for either of these two candidates than those who would. Voters are faced with a dilemma, vote for a career politician of questionable character or a businessman turned politician of questionable character. Many people simply will not vote. That is one reason I am calling this brief series de-voted. The right to vote is the pillar of American democracy but what happens in a democracy when people choose not to vote? We may soon find out.

My goal in this series is to rise above the noise of partisan politics and the political autopsies conducted on cable news networks in order to get a little perspective, God's perspective, on politics. It won't be easy. If the question is American politics, the Bible isn't exactly an instruction manual on the subject. The OT people of God lived under a theocracy. God was king and His people were governed by laws from on high that were enforced through the priesthood. Even when Israel prevailed upon God to give them a flesh-and-blood king so they could be like all the other nations, the king was required to write out, in his own hand, the first five books of the OT, the law. (Dt. 17)

Our founding fathers rejected such a theocracy. The genius of the American experiment is that it not only leaves room for differing religious expression but even protects such expression. So when well-intended Christians use OT verses to support a "Christian" form of government, beware. It requires a little interpretive slight-of-hand and that can lead to deception.

The NT writers knew nothing of American democracy. They were writing to people who lived under a ruling pagan Roman emperor. Christianity flourished.

The early church never faced a dilemma like the American church faces in 2016. Which of the presidential candidates is more Christian, Trump or Clinton? It's a tough call, like the choice between death by hanging or the firing squad? Are those my only two choices?

This may surprise you but I have never been more excited about an election in my life. What if neither candidate reflects the best Christian values? What if both are intoxicated with power beyond the legal limit? What if the church of Jesus Christ does not have a friend in the White House? What if we have to be the church in the midst of a perverse, dying culture? We might have to live like the early Christians who turned the world upside down. It won't be easy. I prefer winning the world for Christ without sacrifice and without cost. Personally, I like my discipleship served up with a side of self-indulgence. I prefer a country where the church calls the shots. That way the society can be just as healthy as the church in America. Meanwhile, while we fret over the state of the world, God is up to something.

I just returned from a worship experience like none I have ever before witnessed. Over 3,000 pastors from over 100 nations. I was truly a minority at the GProCongress. Two of the pastors came late to the conference because they had just been released from jail for preaching the gospel in a country where such behavior is considered seditious and subversive to the government. Yet the church is growing in ways that will never be reported by the media. One pastor told me that one of the most receptive groups of people to the gospel are Muslim refugees who are fleeing the violence that inevitably arises between corrupt governments and jihadi leaders. Could the gospel actually be advancing through the greatest humanitarian crisis since the second world war? History proves that's the way the church has always grown.

So, if your concern for America is greater than your vision of the kingdom of God then you are in for a really bad November. But if your vision of the kingdom of God is greater than any human government, then you can participate in our democracy and vote with confidence, knowing God will determine the outcome of the election.

Let me offer three reasons why I am so optimistic. Maybe these will help you keep a sound mind while it seems like everyone else in the world is losing theirs.

I. God's kingdom is coming. The kingdom of God is the rule of an eternal, sovereign God over all the universe. God is the undeniable ruler of all creation. Even the proud King Nebuchadnezzar declared, "His kingdom is an eternal

kingdom” (Daniel 4:3). Every authority that exists has been established by God (Romans 13:1). The apostle Paul described the Kingdom of God as one of "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Ro. 14:17). One day everything will be made right, everyone will be at peace and every day will be full of joy forever and ever.

Jesus was passionately preoccupied with the kingdom of God. It was His first subject/last subject. His parables often begin with "the kingdom of God is like..." Jesus inaugurated the kingdom when He came to earth but we do not yet experience it in all its fullness. That's why we "seek first the kingdom of God."

As to the kingdoms of this world, Jesus was respectfully indifferent. He made this clear when He stood before Pontius Pilate who represented the Emperor. "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." Jn. 18:36

About the only time Jesus ever came close to making a political statement was when someone handed Him a coin with the image of Caesar imprinted on it. He said, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." (Mt. 22:21). In other words, government does have a rightful place in everyone's life. We can and should be in subjection to government and God at the same time. But ultimately, when there is a conflict between the two kingdoms, we owe our allegiance to God. We are devoted to God and His sovereign authority first.

II. We are citizens of heaven. "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Phil. 3:20. We do not fix our hope on our citizenship here. We are blessed to have the rights and privileges we do as U.S. citizens. Ours is a remarkable country. But those who confuse America with the kingdom of God can do more harm than good by desperately trying to build a network of politically united voters and labeling it "Christian." Building this kind of coalition often requires the Christianization of useful allies. So evangelical leaders meet with Trump to vet him as a Christian. Meanwhile, another group of pastors gathered around "President-to-be Clinton" to "decree and declare the favor of the Lord upon her."

Sadly, Christianizing politicians isn't limited to those who are alive and breathing. Some revisionist historians say that all our founding fathers were Christians. Thomas Jefferson was a great American. He was right about independence from King George, but he was quite wrong about independence from King Jesus. If you

become desperate to win an election, then you build a coalition that includes an artificial cloud of witnesses. In so doing, the cross of Christ becomes a stumbling block, not a rallying point.

Paul's declaration that we are citizens of heaven was an admonition in response to those who had become married to the things of this world. Such behavior was antithetical to the gospel. He warned the Philippians that "many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, **with minds set on earthly things.**" Phil. 3:18-19

Our citizenship in God's Kingdom should inform all of life - even your dating life. Last year I met Kirsten Powers, a regular commentator on Fox News. She is sort of their token liberal. Her parents were liberal, agnostic archaeologists. Kirsten excelled at the university level and went on to study at Georgetown Law School. The academic bubble protected her from many of the offensive and archaic views of conservative Christians. Eventually her career took her to NYC where she dated Congressman Anthony Weiner for a while. As God would have it, she then began dating a man who told her that he was a follower of Jesus and that it was very important that she attend church with him. This was a strange request to ask of an atheist. But she went and ultimately came to Christ. Her relationship with the man ended but she still follows Jesus. I'm so glad the man she dated had his priorities straight and saw himself as a citizen of Heaven and an ambassador for Christ.

III. We are God's representatives on earth. "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us." (2 Cor. 5:20). Our calling is to be a prophetic voice to an earthly kingdom. We are in the world but not to be of the world. One writer has referred to Christians as "resident aliens." If we are too "resident" we have no prophetic message. If we are too "alien" we have no credibility. Jer. 29 is such a good reminder to us of how God wants us to live on this alien planet. "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, 'Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.'" Jer. 29:4-7

God commanded His people to seek the welfare of the city in which they lived. And what city was that? Babylon. And who was the King? Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was a proud and wicked tyrant. Daniel said of him, "Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled." (Dan. 5:19). And yet, Daniel showed respect for this tyrannical king. If anyone had reason to despise a leader, it would be Daniel. Instead, he dignified him. Daniel respected the king. Our calling as Christians in America involves cultural engagement for the sake of the city.

As Christianity grows strange to a secular culture, we are free to be prophetic. We must live in the tension between prophetic distance and prophetic engagement. We are prophetically distant, in that we don't become court chaplains for any politician or political party. We're prophetically engaged in that we see the connection between the gospel and justice, just like those brave abolitionists and civil rights leaders of the past. And just like so many in the pro-life community. The priority of the gospel doesn't mean that we shrug off injustice or unrighteousness, but it means we fight a different way. But above all, we do what prophets always do: we bear witness.

Russel Moore reminds us, "The world system around us, the cultural matrix we inhabit, is alien to the kingdom of God—with different priorities, different strategies, and a different vision of the future. If we don't see that we are walking a narrow and counter-intuitive road, we will have nothing distinctive to say because we will have forgotten who we are."

So let me repeat, if your concern for America is greater than your vision of the kingdom of God then you are in for a really bad November. But if your vision of the kingdom of God is greater than any human government, then by all means, participate in our democracy and vote with confidence, knowing God will determine the outcome of the election.

Think about these things. And if you are thinking about de-voting, devote yourself to God. He is sovereign and in control of the future. I don't know who the next president will be but I do know that God is king. Submit to Him and rejoice in the fact that you have a passport that will allow you to enter Heaven. But in the meantime, seek the welfare of this country and this city because in its welfare we will have welfare.