

It's Up to You 2025 (Week 6) - Do politics have a place in church?

### **Yesterday's Sermon Summary**

1. Our question yesterday was "Does politics have a place in church?" Interestingly, this question was submitted before the landmark I.R.S. change a month ago in which places of worship now will be allowed endorse political candidates and contribute to political campaigns without losing their tax-exempt status. (You can read about this decision in the next section below). But, truth be told, faith communities have blurred and crossed these lines for a long time now - e.g., hosting a particular candidate at a service or through their teaching in which it's overtly or tacitly communicated that congregants should support one particular candidate.

2. There are any number of perils when churches get too cozy with the politics of their day. The Declaration of Faith (1977) names two: a) the church historically has struggled in regard to politics, so much so that C. S. Lewis among others would conclude that the worst sins of the church have occurred when it confused religion and politics, and b) the church would mix message, confusing itself and others on what's Christian and what's cultural (in our case, American). But there are yet other dangers, from the risk of having homogeneous churches (when the hallmark of the first church was its diversity) to a clear violation of that great Presbyterian notion that "God alone is the Lord of the conscience" (in this case, about politics).

3. But maybe more fundamentally we need to ask - what do we mean by "politics"? Too easily we settle in 21st-century America for a shallow, deficit definition focused on elections and partisanship. But "politics" derives from two ancient Greek words meaning "citizen" (politase) and "city" (polis). Thus, a better, deeper understanding of politics is that it tells us how we can be good citizens and care for our locale (city, community, state, country), or, as Jesus would say, how we "love our neighbor."



4. Katelyn Schiess is a doctoral student at Duke Divinity School specializing in the intersection of politics and religion in American history. She writes about this better, deeper definition of politics: "Our religious activities are worthless if they aren't causing us to live and act justly. God does not divide between justice and worship... We need to unlearn our bent toward a private religion and a public politics - and see our participation in political life as a reflection of our very public faith... For Christians, politics is not important because we ascribe great value to political ideas, but because we ascribe great value to the human person... In one way or another, almost any political or moral issue is about the honor and protection of human beings...Every policy issue is based on moral principles and has moral implications."

5. Understood this way, we can conclude quickly that the Bible itself is political from cover to cover: e.g., Moses was a political leader seeking to lead the Hebrews out of oppression, the Mosaic law sought to stipulate how ancient Israel might structure its society in a way that aligned with God's own priorities, the O.T. prophets were both spiritual and political/social critics, and Jesus and the first Christians were political insofar as they sought to challenge social/cultural assumptions and structures and chart a different, more just, more generous course. That we as white American Christians sometimes don't see that in scripture is indicative of our privilege: as the beneficiaries of and at the center of culture for centuries, we could dilute the meaning of scripture by making it only "spiritual" (this is an insight of Rev. Christian Brooks of the PCUSA's Office for Public Witness).

6. Our Presbyterian creeds can help us flesh out what the better, deeper understanding of politics works. First, consider section 9.43 of The Confession of 1967: "In each time and place there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit and humbled by its own complicity...seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these situations."

7. So we should have a humble threefold response to the vexing, complicated, nuanced "problems and crises" of our own day: a) we acknowledge that we as Christians and the church are complicit, if unwittingly, in the problem, b) we admit that we don't yet know God's will on the matter and we seek it together, and c) likewise, we admit together that we don't yet know how to obey but hope to learn that together. This speaks to churches being safe spaces, maybe the ONLY safe spaces, in a polarized country within which we can question, doubt, disagree, wonder, and grow, ultimately becoming a "sandpaper church" for one another (a turn of phrase from Lillian Daniel, a district leader in The United Church of Christ.)

8. A second Presbyterian creed that helps us see a responsible, active intersection of Christianity and politics is The Belhar Confession, the last section of which reads in part: "We believe...that the church must stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies that the church must witness and strive against any form of injustice. We believe...that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged. In following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interest, and thus control and harm others."

9. So the Belhar Confession points us toward both standing by and with, and also standing against. As the church, we are to stand by or with anyone or any group in our culture who is suffering, in need, or being wronged (that is, bearing the brunt of injustice). In a word, this is advocacy - we choose to prioritize mutual relationships with these people/groups and to amplify and bring centerstage their voices that too often go unheard. But we also "stand against," namely against abuse of power and privilege, selfishness that goes unchallenged, and those who seek to control and harm. As German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

10. We finished with a crucial reminder from a third PCUSA creed, "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," written in 1934 by German and Swiss theologians as they watched in horror at the rise of Hitler and his co-opting of the German church. It reminds us that "God makes claim upon our entire life. We reject therefore the false doctrine that maintains that there are domains of our life in which we do not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords." We often conceive of having a political life, a family life, a work life, a moral life, a recreational life, an emotional life, and a spiritual life, but this creed cuts through that artificial differentiation. No, we only have one life and Christ alone governs and informs all of it. We began our political weighing and deliberating not with what a particular party or candidate says, but with what Christ teaches.

## More this Week

1. While we'll offer up some good resources below, it's most important to consider prayerfully how each of us will take action in whatever small, specific way that we can. This week or in the forthcoming month, how can you...

- ...Help others expand or deepen their Christian view of what "politics" is or is not?
- ...Begin to learn about a present day "problem or crisis" about which you are confused or in question?
- ...Help safeguard KirkWood as a safe place to learn and discern together, in which we can gently be "sandpaper" to one another?
- ...Stand by or with someone in your world who is suffering, wronged, or in need? How can you invest in that relationship and amplify their voice?
- ...Stand and witness against that which is unjust, oppressive, controlling, harmful, or selfish (all words from The Belhar Confession)?

2. Spend a week getting familiar with the rich insight and guidance we can glean from our PCUSA creeds about a deeper, better understanding of the intersection of Christianity and politics. Try these three, all of which were used or referenced in yesterday's service:

- The Confession of Faith (1967), sections 9.43-9.47: [confess671\\_0](#)
- The Declaration of Faith (1977), chapter 7, section 5: [decofffaith1](#)
- The Belhar Confession (1986/2016), section four: [The Belhar Confessio](#)

3. On the recent I.R.S. change about faith communities endorsing political candidates: [Churches can endorse politicians, IRS says in court filing](#)

4. A smattering of resources you might want to explore:

- Why is the PCUSA sticking its nose into "politics"?: [Why are Presbyterians sticking their noses in politics?](#)
- "When Polarization Hits the Pews" by Rev. Dr. Clay Stauffer of The Vanderbilt Project on Unity & American Democracy: [When Polarization Hits the Pews](#)
- How do we "stand with/by" those who are suffering, in need, or being wrong? It's more than just serving or caring for them. It's "advocacy." Here's a great overview of what that means for Christians: [How To Be an Advocate: 10 Ways](#)
- Two very readable books by Katelyn Scheiss, that moderate evangelical scholar who specializes in the historical intersection of faith and politics in American history:
  - [Ballot and the Bible: How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics and Where We Go from Here: Kaitlyn Schiess](#)
  - [The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Our Neighbor: Schiess, Kaitlyn, Wear, Michael](#)