



POLITICS, THE PULPIT, AND RICHARD MOUW

Carl Henry Was Half Right

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Ask any pastor you know and he will likely tell you that it is forbidden for a pastor to support or oppose political candidates or leaders from the pulpit. This idea seems to be accepted almost as firmly as some Gospel truths. But is this widespread belief true from a legal perspective? How about from a theological perspective? Is it even wise? Should the state, via its taxing authority, really determine the content of a pastor's remarks? Should tax exemption pivot on the pastor's prose? Many, if not most, pastors have not thought through this issue on any serious level and merely accept this self-censorship as "conventional wisdom." Carl Henry and now Richard Mouw thankfully disavow this idea, at least in part. However, in their collective formulation that the institutional church and its leaders should not positively prescribe or endorse particular policy matters or candidates—they both err.

POLITICAL PULPITS?

There are good reasons why a pastor should fearlessly move beyond saying "no," and thereby support or oppose political candidates. I offer three:

1. Scripture Warrants Addressing Political Leaders.

The Bible is replete with examples of spiritual leaders addressing political leaders, both positively and negatively. This occurs negatively when a leader's efforts conflict with God's commands. In the same vein, leaders are praised when their behavior aligns with God's word. One of the earliest examples occurs when Moses confronted Pharaoh for oppressing the Israelites (Exod. 5-12). Moses did not respond by explaining to God that a spiritual leader should not address politics and political leaders. Nathan confronted King David after he committed adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12). Elijah confronted King Ahab with God's judgment of drought because of Ahab's sinful behavior (1 Kings 17 cf. 22).

Additionally, the Psalms, which are, among other things, worship songs, frequently address political leaders. Psalm 2 calls political leaders to "kiss the Son" and follow His ways. Psalm 58 confronts "rulers" who "speak unjustly." Psalm 83 indicts oppressive political leaders and petitions God to destroy them." Psalm 94 condemns

wicked leaders who "frame injustice by statute." It would be odd to sing about these things poetically in worship songs, but consider them off limits in the pastor's pulpit. A pastor can sing it, but not say it?

Let us think that the Old Testament only confronts the kings of Israel or Judah, we must remember how Daniel confronted King Nebuchadnezzar over his pride. Daniel told the Babylonian monarch that he would be driven away from his kingship like an animal until he acknowledged "that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" (Dan. 4:25). Similarly, Jonah confronted Nineveh, including its leaders, because of its sin (Jon. 3:1-9).

We cannot simply discard these Old Testament examples as inapplicable under a misunderstanding that religion and the state were one and the same back then. The fact is that the Old Testament contained a version of the "separation between church and state." Priests, with a few exceptions, came from the tribe of Levi, and kings came from other tribes, primarily the tribe of Judah. Kings who tried to exercise priestly roles were punished by God (see Saul in 1 Samuel 13 and Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26). There was an *institutional* separation—but not an *ethical* separation—between the priest and the *polis*.

The New Testament also directly engages political leaders. John the Baptist was imprisoned and ultimately beheaded because he confronted Herod for deviating from God's design for marriage (Mt. 14:3-4). Jesus called Herod Antipas "a fox" and refused to leave Jerusalem when Herod wanted to kill him (Lk. 13:31-32). When on trial, Jesus reminded Pontius Pilate that he would have no authority—that is *legal* and *political* authority — unless it has been granted to him from above (Jn. 19).

There are also Scriptural instances in which political leaders are praised or urged by God's people to do the right thing. Nehemiah petitioned Artaxerxes to allow the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem (Neh. 2:1-8). When Artaxerxes does the right thing, he is praised by the religious leaders. Esther intervened with King Xerxes to prevent a planned slaughter of the Jewish people (Esth. 5, 7, 8). When President Clinton signed

the DOMA and RFRA bills—laws protecting marriage and religious liberty—should not religious leaders have been free to commend such specific public policy actions?

We might add that the Bible instructs Jesus' followers in ways that imply addressing civil magistrates in the context of the congregational gathering. For example, God commands believers to "honor the emperor" (1 Pet. 2:17). Scripture also commands that "prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving" be made for "kings and all those in authority, that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). If believers can pray for President Clinton's marriage to be preserved after his adultery was revealed, why can't pastors address that same issue from the pulpit in order to direct the believers to obey that scriptural command? To maintain fidelity with Paul's command, why can't pastors express thankfulness when a President's actions and policies respect life, marriage, or religious freedom?

2. Pastoral Silence is a Recent Partisan Invention.

The idea that pastors should not vocally support or oppose political leaders is a new phenomenon. The first 166 years of America, from the time of the Constitution's ratification until 1954, pastors could, and indeed did, speak freely from their pulpits both supporting and opposing political candidates for office.¹ The pulpits of New England thundered with revolutionary fervor, a fervor grounded in a biblical resistance to tyranny.²

That all changed, however, in 1954, with the passage of the Johnson Amendment. Lyndon Johnson was running for reelection to the United States Senate, but faced opposition from two secular non-profit organizations—the Facts Forum and the Committee for Constitutional Government. These organizations were dedicated to opposing communism, and believed that Johnson's stance against communism was too lenient. With his reelection in jeopardy, Johnson conceived a cunning idea to change the law to prohibit non-profits from supporting

or opposing candidates for office. As one scholar of the Johnson Amendment concluded:

Johnson was not trying to address any constitutional issue related to separation of church and state; and he did not offer the amendment because of anything that churches had done... The ban on electioneering has nothing to do with the First Amendment or Jeffersonian principles of separation of church and state.³

A muted pulpit did not arise from any enlightened or noble constitutional principle, but rather became an unintended casualty from a partisan end run that was wholly unconcerned with religious expression. The current ban and self-censorship by pastors supporting or opposing candidates flows from an incumbent-protection measure passed by a powerful Senator bent on keeping his seat in the halls of power.

3. Addressing Public Policies and Persons Benefits the Common Good.

As believers, we are commanded to "do justice" (Mic. 6:8). God calls his people, especially when living 'outside the religious bubble' to "seek the welfare [shalom] of the city" (Jer. 29). The God of Scripture loves justice and hates when injustice pervades a society (see Is. 61:8, Amos 5:23-24; Prov. 14:34 and 29:2). Confronting evil and exalting righteousness by being salt and light, seeking God's kingdom and his righteousness (justice), are hallmarks of the Christian faith. How can a shepherd equip the sheep to reflect these ethical mandates without addressing them in his calling as a vocational preacher?

Recall that the words of Christian leaders from the pulpit sustained the abolition movements in the U.K. and the U.S., as well as the subsequent civil rights movement. The IRS would have silenced Wilberforce and the Clapham sect as well as Martin Luther King, Jr. and his allies. Silencing such giants of justice would impoverish

¹In a sermon in 1800, William Linn opposed Thomas Jefferson's candidacy for President. In 1864, Pastor William Stearns endorsed Abraham Lincoln for President, saying: "There is a power in this land hardly second to that of an immense army. It is the wisdom and honesty, and the reputation of it inspiring confidence at home and abroad, which belong to the character of Abraham Lincoln."

²Jonathan Mayhew, a colonial pastor, was not shy in preaching against tyranny. In 1750 he addressed this very issue from his New England pulpit: "It is hoped that but few will think the subject of it an improper one to be discoursed on in the pulpit—[that it is] a notion that this is preaching politics instead of Christ. However, to remove all prejudices of this sort, I beg it may be remembered that "all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" [2 Timothy 3:16]. When, then, should not those parts of Scripture that relate to civil government be examined and explained from the desk [pulpit], as well as others? Obedience to the civil magistrate is a Christian duty; and if so, why should not the nature, grounds, and extent of it be considered in a Christian assembly? (*A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* [1750]).

³JAMES D. DAVIDSON, *Why Churches Cannot Endorse or Oppose Political Candidates*, REVIEW OF RELIGIOUS RESEARCH, Vol. 40, No. 1, 16, 29 (September, 1998).

the public square and curtail the expansion of public justice.

Finally, note that in the U.S., it is the people, not the politicians, in whom political power resides. Many of those people practice religion publicly, that is, they try to live out their zealously held religious precepts. Far from being irrelevant, those religious precepts enrich the public discourse. Proclaiming how religion affects public life is part and parcel of informing a citizen on how to live faithfully. But, to do so, they must learn how their faith applies outside the church doors, including how it applies to matters of culture and, yes, public policy beyond saying “no.” For too long politicians have gotten a free pass from moral and biblical scrutiny by the church and its pastors. Silencing the pulpit from addressing such matters withholds a crucial mechanism for developing and enriching the political checks and balances held by the citizenry, which are integral to a well-functioning constitutional republic. As Jefferson wrote, governments are instituted among men to secure—not confer—inalienable rights, rights bestowed by the Creator. The IRS rule treats voters more as subjects than as citizens. I conclude that politics in the pulpit is a prudent practice for promoting public justice, whether the pastor and church speak negatively or positively.

THE PULPIT: GOD OR CAESAR’S?

Objections remain. Some refreshingly abound with pastoral care and concern—something needed but frequently omitted in many of today’s “cultural discussions.” We must be grateful that both Henry and Mouw seek to prevent the church and its pulpit from being reduced to a partisan political puppet. Many objections, however, never meaningfully engage the central question of whether the state or the church has the final say over the content of pulpit preaching. I briefly assess three such objections:

1. “No Certainty, No Confidence!”

Since pastors could be mistaken regarding a political issue or a candidate, doesn’t it follow that they should rarely, if ever, address these areas? I offer three points. First, every time a preacher says *anything*, whether “political” or not, he could be mistaken. How confident or certain must a pastor be before he passes this “certainty test?” If this objection were correct, no prudent pastor would say anything. The need for prudence in the pulpit is not a trump card gagging all political commentary.

Second, the point here is not that every pastor should unwisely spout inane political or partisan slogans, but rather that a pastor possesses the liberty—liberty that should not be constrained by the state—to wisely address these matters, negatively *and* positively. In wisely addressing such matters, he edifies and equips the sheep and glorifies the Lord.

Third, this objection seems to imply that addressing politics somehow deviates from proclaiming the gospel. That does not seem to be Paul’s understanding. In Paul’s calculus, ethics, including ethics in the public square applied to persons (“law”), *aligns* with the faithful application of the gospel (See 1 Timothy 1:8-10). According to Paul, Scripture equips people for “righteousness” and “every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Does the public square need righteousness? Is politics a good work (Rom. 13)? Yes and yes. Failing to address such matters withholds God’s full word from the flock.

If a pastor refuses to do this from the pulpit, then he is not faithfully executing his calling. A moral or ethical matter labeled “political” does not cease being a moral matter that would benefit from the light of God’s word. Trying to circumscribe this by only allowing “negative” statements is arbitrary and unfeasible as one man’s “no” is another man’s “yes,” depending on how the principle is framed.

2. “Issues Maybe; Candidates Never!”

This second objection creates a false dichotomy contending that addressing *issues* somehow differs from addressing particular *candidates*, which is deemed particularly problematic and even pernicious. This is where the Henry/Mouw thesis is most exposed as lacking. How, we may ask, do institutions, including political institutions, operate and address matters? They do so via *agents* who are *persons*. *Issues* are effectuated by *persons*. One cannot coherently divorce the agent from the issue because the agent is the actor who effectuates the issue.

To say that preaching and applying Scripture does not apply to persons effectuating issues, but only to the issues themselves, is to truncate Scripture’s witness and intent. The pastor is not somehow “safe” or faithful if he only draws the scriptural line to a key issue—only saying “no”—but omits “naming names.” Scripture often “calls out” actors by name, warning the faithful to avoid and thus *not* support them (e.g., Alexander, Hymenaeus, and Diotrophes in 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 4:14; and 3 Jn. 9). “Naming names” carries biblical warrant, which applies

⁴ What about “endorsing” political parties? We may observe that Jesus “names party names” as well (e.g., Jesus, in Rev. 2-3, identifies several parties with whom church members are affiliated and then commands them to repent and disassociate). The Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, the Sanhedrin, and the Roman officials are all collectively addressed as parties as well.

to political actors as well.⁴ Certainly, if a pastor knows that a gaping defect exists in a candidate's moral competence for the position, he ought to seek the "welfare of the city" (Jer. 29) by alerting the congregation to that deficit. A pastor who remains silent withholds good from the city if he knows that a particular candidate lacks the character to hold a position of responsibility and leadership (See *e.g.*, Deut. 16:19; 17:14; and 2 Chron. 26). Limiting preaching to issues and not addressing persons *qua* persons is necessarily incomplete.

3. "But It Causes Division!"

Lastly, objectors often contend that "division" may result from a pastor "naming names." This assertion commits the "false cause" fallacy (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*) as well as the error of hasty generalization (reaching a conclusion on insufficient evidence). Moreover, this point cuts both ways: what about division "caused" by a pastor who refuses to address a prominent cultural issue that impacts the congregation's ability to discharge its calling? A pastor's silence can just as easily precipitate division as well as threaten the congregation's ability to do what it is called to do. We may add that, in Pauline theology, division is not always necessarily bad. It can, at times, be the means by which the faithful are made evident (1 Cor. 11:9).

Accordingly, invoking the "unity" card on its own provides little guidance for the question at hand. Why? Because *every* assertion from the pulpit potentially could precipitate disunity at some level. If three people depart from a 6000-member congregation, is that inappropriate division? What if two depart? One? The entire analytic thread unwinds because it manifestly lacks a sound principled basis. Thus, this point comprises a classic red herring fallacy as well (introducing an irrelevant topic that distracts from the original topic). Solomon says it well: "Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law strive against them" (Pr. 28:4). By refusing to "name names" and instead by counseling

silence, these objectors are by default (not design) orienting pastors (and their flocks) to ultimately praise the wicked. Exposing evil, including those who do evil, is part of what Christians are called to do (Eph. 5:11). Could voting for an ungodly candidate constitute participation in "unfruitful works of darkness," which Paul forbids?

CONCLUSION

While many objectors may be well intended and are prompted by wise pastoral and ecclesiastical concerns, silencing the pulpit, especially when bowing to Caesar's desires or edicts, fails to comport with the Bible. The Henry-Mouw thesis is a moral bridge that only crosses the ethical river part way. Neither Henry nor Mouw were right. Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords; that's about as political as one could be. His faithful followers must take every thought captive—including political thoughts—to this King. Preaching is not exempt from this command. In fact, preaching should be emblematic of it.

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