

Jesus and Politics

Matthew 22:15-22

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It was 1964. I was 9 years old. I remember Democrat Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey were battling with Republican Barry Goldwater and Bill Miller in the presidential election. As pastor to Democrat and Republican believers and an evangelist to Democrat and Republican non-believers, my father kept his voting preferences to himself, but that was not true of my oldest brother. He was a junior in high school and he was having too much fun playing political sticker war with a friend. In our little South Dakota town of 388 people, Johnson and Goldwater stickers were multiplying faster than leaves on the lawn. Stickers and buttons were slapped on notebooks, band instruments, their cases and anything big enough to fit on. I think my brother and a female classmate were especially culpable, multiplying opposing stickers just to get the better of one another. I think at one point they were slapping their stickers over each other's stickers. Whatever the case, Halloween came on a Saturday that year, and Saturday night provided an especially good opportunity for young people to pull their pranks. Of course, there were funny ones. Some teens lifted a school teacher's Volkswagen Beetle onto a tree stump, and my brother's warring classmate pulled one on us. She made a large, long banner that stretched across the front of our home. We lived in a parsonage situated on the community's main street. The banner said "Vote for..." her candidate. Somehow we found the banner early that morning before the streets became populated with church goers. Should we take the banner down in case my father's ministry is hindered? No, my brother wanted revenge. He knew this classmate went

to early mass at the Catholic Church and would drive by our home. Employing his younger siblings, my brother sprang into action. He re-hung the banner with the message “Vote for...” the opposite candidate. We all peered outside a window waiting for the classmate and her family to drive by. Sure enough, she came at the appointed time laughing and talking to her family. As she pointed to the banner, her mouth dropped open. The turn-about evoked a lot of laughter in the Gabel home that Sunday morning.

Elections can be fun. They ought to be. Let’s celebrate the gift they are and the opportunities they afford. American elections are based on the truth that we all were created equal. We all were created to be rulers like God and should be governed by our consent. Each election is a blessing. In human history they are rare. Let’s give thanks for such blessing.

Elections are also opportunities for growth. During the election cycle, we meet gifted people and examine their abilities and convictions. We hear their stories and ideas, and we also can hear our brothers and sisters share their stories, hopes, dreams, beliefs and values. We can learn about one another and then better serve and share our hearts with each other.

I have two elderly uncles who are utterly committed to Jesus, and one prefers Democrats, the other Republicans. Their preferences result from their experiences. Because of elections I better understand and appreciate their experiences.

I’m concerned, however, that we place our hope in elections. This election cycle I have been given all kinds of “voter education” materials to handout to you. I’ve been called several times to disseminate voter guides or registration cards. I’ve put all the materials in my office, but I’ve handed out nothing. I think you’ll discover why.

I invited Jim Sky to speak a couple times. He is a Native American, who God pulled out of the deepest mire, a life of crime, drunkenness, and futility. God raised him up as a great

prophet of redemption. At one point in a message around four years ago, my friend came within a whisker of explicitly endorsing President Bush. For some, the main point of his message was pretty much lost. (Jim is a wonderful man of God and is worthy of hearing again, but I fear that his message was derailed that day for some of us who needed it.) Earlier, I had another guest share. In a message on peace, he pondered what would be the effect if some of the money spent on the Iraq war was invested in peace initiatives. His words were interpreted by some as a rebuff of President Bush, and the focus of his message was lost to some. About a month ago, I had lunch with Greg Boyd. Greg is a former professor at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul. He is a brilliant thinker, writer and speaker. A dozen years ago, he founded a church in the Twin Cities that grew to average 5,000 people a weekend. He observed that the most resistant countries to the gospel today are where the church had the most influence on government in the past. One Sunday morning he sought to address the difference between the kingdom of God and church-influenced government. Everything he said was filtered through political lenses. It appeared he was rebuffing the social conservative political movement, which is largely Republican. He lost a thousand members that Sunday. Clearly, we put a lot of our hope in human government.

We know what an Adolf Hitler can do. We fear the trouble leaders cause. We also hope for the blessing of leaders like President Abraham Lincoln. In the Bible Israel was blessed by the leadership of David and Solomon. However, it suffered civil war under King Rehoboam and oblivion under 11-years of King Zedekiah's rule. All but the poorest were exiled and every building in Jerusalem – the temple, the palace and all its houses – were burned.

Despite that history, Jesus was not overly concerned about Caesar or King Herod. In Matthew 22 Jesus was challenged about paying taxes to the Roman oppressors. Jesus asked for a Roman coin. The image stamped on the coin showed who had human authority, Caesar. Jesus

said, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” He taught we are to regard both human and divine authority. In Luke 13 when Pharisees warned Jesus to leave the area because Herod wanted to kill him, Jesus replied:

Go tell that fox, “I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.” In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day — for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! (Luke 13:32-33, NIV)

Jesus didn’t demand that King Herod abdicate. The words “Go tell that fox” suggest he was upset. However, he instructed the Pharisees to tell the king he would continue, even to death, his mission of freeing and healing people at their deepest level.

Jesus did not equate the kingdom of God with the government. He declared:

My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place. (John 18:36, NIV)

I don’t suggest that those who vote or implement their values in government are somehow wrong. I believe many follow God in what they do. However, understand that the Spirit of God writes his law in people’s hearts and restores people to love God and their neighbor. The way to life and love is through Calvary, not Washington or St. Paul. The way to renew a nation is not through the office of a President. When the Holy Spirit came on believers, he made them witnesses, not governors; and he deployed them all over the earth.

The Apostle Paul wrote:

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:1-4, NIV)

Your vote is important, but your prayer is more important!

I'm not sure Abraham Lincoln was the right vote in 1860. He was enormously gifted, but biographies suggest he was more pragmatic than principled. His relationship with Christian leaders was bad. However, I think he was the most prayed for President of all time. By the end of his first term, he was a great President. He exhibited mercy, humility and faith. These traits were captured in the message of his second inaugural speech and in acts of generosity toward the South. Lincoln *developed* the faith of a servant of God. Whether he ever enjoyed the peace and joy from the faith of a child of God, I don't know. Regardless, God blessed Abraham Lincoln with a new faith and our nation with a new peace.

This Tuesday God has given us the high privilege and responsibility of selecting our leadership. Do so. Vote. The Bible tells us that wise, spiritual Samuel would have picked the oldest brother of David for leader instead of David. Obviously, he only knew in part, and so do we. Knowing in part, we must do our work and our work includes voting; however, our call is to pray for our leaders and witness to the impact of the cross on our lives.

America needs redemption, and God has placed you and me together today in response to that need!