

Shalom!

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Being Christian and a Citizen

A MEASURE OF how frustrated I have been during the 2016 presidential election season in the U.S. is how many of my personal blog posts over the last months have been inspired by that frustration. I've described a "modest proposal for truth," defended political correctness as a way to be kind to and respectful of others, not given in to fear (see the Spring edition for more on this), and wondered whether my conscience will allow me to vote at all.

The early Brethren in Christ believed in being separated from the world, including politics. Their reasons included the fact that their ancestors were persecuted by the state, which, according to Brethren in Christ historian E. Morris Sider writing in 1986, "confirmed that those who were responsible for the political life of the country were evil men; thus politics were evil, and thus the Christian must have nothing to do with such matters." Another reason was that they were also "convinced that to engage in the electoral process was to hazard the right to conscientious objector privileges during times of war." During the first century of the denomination, "the non-voting position was the accepted one...which suggests that the position was deeply embedded in Brethren in Christ tradition." To vote was to be complicit in the system, and to perpetuate or reinforce the coercive nature of politics and the compromise of values inherent in the system.

Times have changed, and now the vast majority of Brethren in Christ people in the U. S. vote in national, state, and local elections. Our interpretation of what it means to

be separated from the world is different than it was in the early days. I myself have voted in every election since 1972, the first time I was old enough to vote. I take the responsibility seriously, and believe it is important for me as a citizen of a participatory democracy to try to influence the system more in the direction of the values I consider important: the common good, justice, peace, compassion, care for people who are disadvantaged and marginalized both here and elsewhere in the world, care for the earth, stewardship of resources, respect for the essential dignity and worth of everyone, and so on. At the same time, I am only too well aware of the danger of putting too much trust in the political system and not enough in things of more eternal significance, and of seriously compromising my deeply-held values.

This edition of *Shalom!* features a variety of perspectives on what it means to be both a Christian and a citizen of an earthly kingdom, especially given our separatist Anabaptist heritage. Interestingly, five of the writers are pastors, some of them reflecting on the challenges of navigating partisan politics in the church. As this seemingly interminable election season winds down and those of us who vote finally cast our ballots on November 8, I hope we'll remember where our ultimate allegiance resides and that no matter what happens, God is in control. And, while this edition is very U.S.-specific, I hope readers in other places will also find principles they can apply in their own contexts.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Is Christ Lord of Our Politics?

by Ronald J. Sider

ONE WAY CHRISTIANS live out our belief that Christ is Lord, even of political life, is to pray for wisdom to act politically in ways that best reflect Christ our Lord. What is God's agenda? How do we let Christ be Lord of our politics? We need a biblically balanced agenda, a passion for truth, and a passion for civility.

If you want to be truly Christian in your politics, you need to ask: What does the Bible say God cares about? When we read the Bible, it becomes clear God cares about: both the sanctity of human life and economic justice, especially for the poor; both marriage and peacemaking; and sexual integrity, racial justice and creation care.

In January, I spoke to hundreds of Christians in Washington at an Evangelicals for

Life event. It was held to coincide with the annual March for Life, which calls for an end to widespread abortion on demand. I said that for decades I have believed and taught that Christians should act on the belief that from the moment of conception we are dealing with persons—human beings made in the image of God. And for decades I have been a part of the movement to reduce abortion both by legislation and through supportive programs to assist unwed pregnant mothers.

But over the years I have also been disturbed by what seemed like a fundamental inconsistency in much of the pro-life movement. They talked a lot about combating abortion but often seemed unconcerned about poverty, starvation, smoking, environmental degradation, racism and capital punishment—all of which also destroy the lives of people made in the image of God.

I agree with Pope Francis, who said when he spoke to Congress last year that the Christian faith teaches “our responsibility to protect and defend human life at every stage of its development.” Because of global poverty, millions of people die unnecessarily. Every day, 18,000 children under five die, mostly from hunger and preventable diseases. Many die of pneumonia, diarrhea and malaria, which are easily treatable. But their poor parents and poor countries lack the resources to provide the inexpensive treatment. Shouldn't Christians urge Congress to increase, not cut, effective governmental programs that reduce poverty and prevent unnecessary death?

Smoking is also a pro-life issue. Smoking kills about 480,000 people in the U.S. every year. Around the world, the death toll from smoking has risen to about six million each year. Environmental degradation is also a pro-life issue. Global warming, unless we act soon, will cause devastating climate change that will lead to the death of millions of poor people. Racism is also a pro-life issue. Young black men are far more likely to be shot by white policemen than are young white men. Capital punishment is a pro-life issue. I have

never understood how killing a person guilty of killing another person is the best way to respect the sanctity of human life.

We cannot be one-issue voters. We must have a biblically balanced agenda: pro-life and pro-poor, pro-family and pro-racial justice, pro-sexual integrity, pro-peace, and pro-creation care.

Christian voters must also have a passion for truth. God hates lies, and lying is bad for democracy. We should insist on knowing the truth. It is easy to go online to Politifact or Factcheck. Responsible organizations like these can quickly tell you whether what a politician says is true.

Finally, Christians should have a passion for civility. Biblical faith calls us to respect every person, no matter how much we disagree with them, because every person is made in the image of God and is loved by God. Civility demands we truly listen to those we disagree with so that we genuinely understand what they are saying. Civility refuses to use racist innuendo or to encourage violence.

As citizens of a democracy, Christians should become vigorously engaged in the 2016 election. We should ask about each candidate: Does this person have a biblically balanced agenda? Whose agenda is closer to the full biblical agenda? Is the candidate honest? Civil?

Your action can influence the outcome of this election. If Christ is your Lord, I urge you to use your influence to promote a biblically balanced agenda, encourage honesty, and reward civility. And remember: as members of one Christian family, our oneness in Christ is vastly more important than any political disagreement.

Ronald J. Sider, who grew up in the Brethren in Christ Church in Canada, is the founder and past president of Evangelicals for Social Action and the author of numerous books, including Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger. This article is condensed from one that first appeared in the June 2016 edition of Christian Ethics Today, and is reprinted with the author's permission.



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Partisan Politics and the Power of the Cross

by David Flowers

WE REMEMBER IT in the church as Palm Sunday, the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—the day when Jesus of Nazareth pre-planned a comical, yet prophetic, event in order to fulfill Zechariah’s prophecy of the coming Messiah (Zech. 9:9).

At the same time Pilate is parading in on the west side of the Temple to oversee Passover, ready to put a stop to any chaos that might ensue, Jesus decides to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. He’s not on a war horse wielding a sword, he’s on a donkey. And he’s not packing a weapon.

Think about that. Not quite the entrance folks were expecting from their Messiah. Nevertheless, the crowds give him a royal welcome. They shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” And all of this to the waving of palm branches, symbolic of Messianic deliverance to the Jews, clearly harkening back to the time the Maccabees threw off Greek rule in Judea.

Everyone understands this scene. This is it—Jesus’ time to prove himself as the long-awaited Messiah, the son of God. Will he go to the Antonio Fortress, where the largest garrison of soldiers are housed in Jerusalem, where Rome kept an eye on things? No doubt, the crowd could quickly turn into a mob and rush the place. But he doesn’t take a right for the fortress; instead he goes left through the eastern gate and into the Temple. He goes in, looks around, and according to Mark’s gospel, he leaves and returns the next day.

He wasn’t “cleansing” the Temple. He was shutting it down. By the end of the week, Jesus had pretty much annoyed everyone. And early Friday morning Jesus is standing before Pilate saying: “My kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36, NLT).

Let’s be clear about this. Jesus isn’t saying that his kingdom is far away in another dimension where we all walk on clouds with

our loved ones singing “Amazing Grace” for eternity. That sort of kingdom isn’t a threat to Pilate or the Sanhedrin, but too often that’s how we’ve imagined it. No, the kingdom of God is real. You can see it if you’re born from above. You can touch it. It’s definitely subversive. But it’s nothing like the kingdoms of the world.

As Greg Boyd says, “The crucial distinction between the two kingdoms is how they provide antithetical answers to the questions of what power one should trust to change ourselves and others: Do you trust ‘power over’ or ‘power under’? Do you trust the power of the sword, the power of external force, or do you trust the influential but non-coercive power of Calvary-like love?” (*The Myth of a Christian Nation*, p. 33).

The kingdom we’re being invited into looks like sacrificial, Calvary-like love, like Jesus riding on a donkey, like him hanging on a cross for the sins of the world.

Make no mistake about it. If we’re being faithful to the King and his kingdom, our obedience will inevitably lead to a collision with the kingdoms of the world, those systems which Satan controls (Matt 4:8-9). We need to hear this now more than ever as disciples living within an American empire. Are we willing to suffer with Jesus and follow him to Golgotha?

As we think back on the discouraged disciples in those final hours, and learn from their despair in the garden with a steadfast Jesus, may we be reminded that this is not the time to fall asleep from the weariness of our trials and tribulations, from our striving to do what is right. It’s also not the time to be overcome with sorrow because Christendom is crumbling and we feel clueless as to how we live in a world hostile to our message. We mustn’t give into the temptation that Jesus rejected in the wilderness with the evil one—the temptation to trust in the power of the sword and law to fight back. As Paul said, our weapons are not like those of the world (2 Cor. 10:4).

So we must be careful that just because we’re not one of “those evangelicals” on one

side of the American political aisle, who are certainly an embarrassment, sometimes a mockery, to the name of Christ, we are somehow more qualified to use government for kingdom purposes, or that we’ve actually found the third way of Jesus. Far from it. Leaving one party and political philosophy for another doesn’t mean we now know how Jesus would vote, even if he would vote.

As an Anabaptist, I’m often asked, “Do you think Jesus would vote?” Well, if he would, I don’t think he’d tell anyone about it. Maybe he would cast his ballot, but then move on about the Father’s business, knowing that participation in the political process is sort of like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. It may allow some folks to make it more swiftly to the lifeboats who don’t want to drown, but the ship is going down.

I don’t say that as a cynic-saint, but instead as a disciple who hears the Lord saying: “My kingdom is not of this world, if it were, I’d be doing worldly kingdom kind of stuff. Sure, I’ll talk with Pilate. I’ll even call Herod a sly fox. But I’m not doing the power-over, tit-for tat thing. No, I’ll expose the evil and injustice of the system by my good works, but I won’t play Caesar’s game. All those who know me will follow me.”

It’s more apparent to me now than any other time in my own life: the church must adopt a healthy suspicion of all kingdoms of the world, all parties, and all candidates. Don’t be fooled into believing or trusting that there is anything uniquely Christian about it. Don’t put your hope and trust in any earthly, political savior or slogan.

If you’re a follower of Jesus, your citizenship—your allegiance—is to a heavenly King and his kingdom (Phil 3:20). Don’t confuse your calling as a kingdom ambassador by mixing the language and concerns of Jesus with partisan politics. Our Lord doesn’t approve.

It’s time to trust in the power of the cross, to pledge our allegiance to the One riding into town on a donkey, the suffering Messiah—vindicated in resurrection because of his faithfulness. It’s time to believe that his

kingdom advances when we stop trying to bring it through worldly kingdom means, and instead see the church as his agents of new creation.

May we stand and pledge our allegiance to our commander and chief—the crucified and risen Christ who rides into his house on a donkey. With him we shall overcome, crushing the head of the serpent with feet fit with readiness that comes from the gospel of

peace.

When our allegiance is tested in the months leading up to the election, as it likely already has been, I want to encourage us to remain faithful to what we have professed in the ordinance of baptism and what we remember every time we share in holy communion: It's in dying that we live.

Lord, help us say it with our lips and with our lives: Jesus Christ is King of Kings and

Lord of Lords. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Come, Lord Jesus. Come.

David Flowers was installed as senior pastor of the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church in July 2016. This article is condensed and reprinted from David's blog, "The Centrality and Supremacy of Jesus Christ," at davidflowers.com.

Citizens of Two Kingdoms

By Micah Brickner

THE RADICAL REFORMATION was a formative era of church history, having implications for much of the modern world. Prior to the work of the Anabaptist reformers, much of the western world featured an alliance of church and state, leading to a central question: can church and state coexist in a helpful manner?

Separation of Church and State

The early Protestant reformers would have said "yes." While Martin Luther held a more moderate perspective on this issue, others like John Calvin saw a much greater reason for church and state to collaborate. Early Anabaptist leaders saw a fundamental challenge with this paradigm, particularly as it pertains to one's choice to follow Jesus. Their radical commitment to baptism being a choice and a rite of initiation into the kingdom of God put them at odds with the state, leading to persecution.

The nonviolent and separatist approach of the Anabaptists inspired other groups throughout Europe. Anabaptists and other groups that espoused similar ideas helped build a new world in North America where the separation of church and state was a fundamental value of the formation of a later United States of America.

The Quakers faced persecution in England and sought opportunities for freedom in the new world, setting up the province of Pennsylvania. As persecution continued for Anabaptists in continental Europe, Pennsylvania became a viable option for many people. Quickly, the colony attracted

Mennonites, Amish, and other Brethren groups.

The Brethren in Christ developed largely as a result of this Pennsylvania experiment. Beginning as the River Brethren, they sought to remove themselves from politics, much like their other Anabaptist brothers and sisters. As the early Brethren in Christ developed their foundational doctrines in 1790, they concluded that members could not hold an authoritative office.¹ This meant that they did not get involved with any government action until after World War II. They did not vote and they did not run for political office; they did, however, pay taxes.

The Brethren in Christ held a literal interpretation of Scripture and thought it ungodly to embrace the state. But they missed out on significant opportunities to be people of peace in a broken world. While Anabaptists doctrinally opposed slavery and some played an active role in abolition, the Brethren in Christ appeared to remain uninvolved. This is a chapter in our church's history when political engagement could have been helpful.

Three Paradigms

Three paradigms are helpful for understanding the coexistence of two distinct kingdoms: isolation, infiltration, and interaction.

Isolation: The Anabaptists were some of the earliest evangelicals—to use the term rather literally. As a result of persecution, however, they were forced into isolation. Sadly, this became the mode of operation for

many Anabaptist groups. Growth was the result of family expansion rather than evangelism.

Infiltration: The infiltration paradigm, where church and state are interconnected, results in either a theocratic state or a state-governed church. We see the former model exercised in fundamental Islamist nations and the latter in places like China where the state has significant control over the church. While the idea of a theocracy seems noble, it poses many challenges to those who don't fit the religious values of the state. A secular state that controls the church weakens the gospel.

Interaction: This is the "Goldilocks" paradigm, where the church interacts with the state and the state is respected by the church. Our allegiance is first and foremost to God and his kingdom, but this does not negate being a citizen of a kingdom of this world. Historically, this approach was not an option—it was either isolation or infiltration. The concept of interaction is a third way approach that helps Anabaptists (and all Christians) find a balance of healthy engagement with civic opportunities.

Practical Steps

If we are called to be citizens of the kingdom of God, how do we interact helpfully with the kingdoms of this world? The answer is found in asking the question: "Is this something that interferes with my values as a citizen of the kingdom of God?" If the answer is "yes," then we should not engage, but if the answer is "no," I believe we can be the light

of Christ. Here are a few ways we can be involved without compromising our values:

1. *Vote*: Sadly, many Americans neglect this powerful right by either not voting or not being educated about the issues when they vote. We can't complain about the issues if we do not take seriously the right to vote. While many early Anabaptists did not see the value of voting in the United States, I believe this might have been a missed opportunity to interact with the state in a helpful way.
2. *Write to government officials*: I have on occasion written letters to politicians, encouraging them to vote a certain way on legislation. One issue that I have addressed is the U.S.'s involvement with military conflicts because I believe that legislators need to be aware of their constituents' concerns with military action.
3. *Serve in elective office*: An Anabaptist

Christian might not want to serve in a government role which involves military leadership, but there are many roles which do not involve this kind of decision-making. Serving on a local school board or municipal council provides opportunities for dialogue without compromising kingdom of God values.

4. *Serve in the community*: One area that Christians too often forget is simply taking action to make a difference. Befriend a homeless person, donate to a local food bank, or volunteer with an employment skills center that helps people find jobs. We cannot wait around for the government to make change; rather, we have a responsibility to help make change ourselves.

As citizens of two kingdoms, we are not called to be isolated or to be infiltrated by the kingdom of the world. We are called to in-

teract in ways that are healthy. The church and the state can coexist helpfully as long as the church realizes its first and primary priority is the kingdom of God and the core of the gospel. When we confuse the two kingdoms, we invite problems.

References

¹Darrell Winger, "Torn Between Two Kingdoms," *In Part*, October 18, 2008. <http://www.inpart.org/feature/torn-between-two-kingdoms>

Micah Brickner and his wife Heather, who are both licensed pastors, recently embarked on a journey of planting a multi-cultural church in the city of Lancaster, PA. This article is condensed from a post from Micah's blog at Jesusatthecenter.org.

Silence Will Often Be Your Best Response

By Joseph Taylor

EARLIER THIS YEAR, perhaps as a kind of New Year's resolution or just to reduce my level of irritability, I stopped following a couple of friends on Facebook. One was very liberal, the other very conservative. Both would post links throughout the day to articles from various websites that reinforced whatever argument they were supporting at that moment. In most cases, the articles they linked to were on sites similar to Think Progress and Talking Points Memo, at one end of the spectrum, or Brietbart and the Daily Caller, at the other.

I'm not opposed to reading opinions from both sides of an issue, although I'd prefer if they'd come from, say, *National Review* or the *New Republic*. Whether you agree with them or not, writers from magazines like those try to argue their positions intelligently. Writers for many online opinion sites seem to be content to fuel the fires of the various discontents of their readers. Add to their noise the voices of talk radio hosts and the pundits who appear on feature shows on 24-hour news channels, and the level of chatter rises to a crescendo.

Both the friends I referred to earlier are Christians, although only one of them shared postings that equated certain positions with faith. One link he posted led to an article from a pastor who used scripture to support his contention that Jesus was not a socialist and that, in fact, Jesus supported the idea of private property. I did a quick Google search and found articles that argued that our Lord would actually approve of socialism, and that he was offended by the idea of private property.

The fact that Christians can be sincere in their faith, hold different political opinions, and believe those opinions are sanctioned by their faith suggests to me that it's too easy for people who are passionate about their politics to conflate the ephemeral with the eternal.

Christians, it seems to me, should always be aware of the long view of history. In our own lives we can often think of how God answered our prayers in ways we didn't anticipate, taking longer than we might have liked. Had we gotten what we wanted at the moment we prayed, our lives would have been

different and not necessarily better.

History itself plays out in ways that surprise us. When I read biographies of presidents or other world leaders, I'm struck by how often their decisions were based on information the rest of us, including columnists and other opinion makers, didn't have. Sometimes policies by leaders that were either opposed or supported by smart, informed people at any given time had consequences—good or bad—that weren't anticipated.

None of this is to suggest that, as Christians, we shouldn't take a stand on certain issues, but experience and age, along with living in an increasingly contentious time, have led me to restrain myself from entering heated conversations about politics. I turned to the Bible for support for my, admittedly, somewhat recent conviction on this issue:

- Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels (2 Tim. 2:23-24).
- But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worth-

less (Titus 3:9).

- Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent (Prov. 17:27-28).

Years ago, I picked up a novel in a used bookstore. Tucked in its pages was a slip of paper, and I recognized that it came from a fortune cookie. “Silence will often be your best response,” my second-hand fortune told me. While it was more prosaic to find this advice where I did than in the Bible, I recognized its profundity immediately.

Recognizing it didn’t mean I followed it. Living in the modern world means reading the right magazines and newspapers and sharing your insights. My grandmother, who always had a colorful phrase at hand, called it “gassing off.” Social media now make it possible to tell everyone how you feel about things, adding your voice to those of the pundits who appear in print and on air.

Here’s the thing, though: Pundits themselves are only right about half the time. A 2011 study by Hamilton College students (www.hamilton.edu/news/polls/pundit) found that columnists, talking heads, and politicians had about as much success predicting how elections or the economy or any

number of other things might turn out as they would have if they had just flipped a coin. They’re paid to actually know enough about those things to shed some light on them, but it turns out they know as much—or, really, as little—as we do.

I worked for a large non-profit for more than 30 years, and often engaged in conversations with co-workers about politics. After one especially heated exchange, our boss came out and told the department, “No discussions about religion or politics.” It was good advice, but it took me a little while and a few more similar discussions to realize its wisdom. In time, I began to change the subject if an especially controversial topic came up, or I said, “I haven’t really thought about it.” I wasted less company time, didn’t insult anyone and wasn’t insulted myself, and found that the world went on without the benefit of my wisdom.

I vote my conscience on a number of issues, and I write to elected officials about things that concern me. I follow politics, and I continue to read columnists and magazine articles. I occasionally talk politics with a few friends. But in a world where news reporting itself seems to both form and react to the discussions on social media, adding your voice easily becomes joining the mob.

Novelist Saul Bellow published an essay

in *Forbes* in 1992 titled, “There is Simply Too Much to Think About.” He was 77 at the time and had been asked to weigh in on many things political and literary over his long life. In the essay, he expresses an irritated amusement at the tendency of everyone from pop singers to television news anchors to be expected to have and express the right opinions. “As the allure of agreement—or conformism—grows,” he wrote, “the perils of independence deepen.”

Bellow opened the piece by writing that when asked for his own take on “...some perplexing question of the day, I sometimes say I am for all the good things and against all the bad things.” Avoiding conflict by dodging conversations that are unconstructive seems to me to be in the Anabaptist tradition of maintaining peace. I hope I have the courage to speak out when it really counts. After all, in the letter to Titus from which I quoted above, Paul advises him to “exhort and reprove with all authority.” For now, though, I’ll try to follow the sage advice of that slip of fortune cookie paper I found.

Joe Taylor attends Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and is an associate editor at Soundstage.com, a collection of high-end audio websites, where he reviews music on CD and vinyl. He is also a bicycle mechanic in his semi-retired life.

American Politics and the Christian Citizen

By Roger Sider

PERHAPS NO YEAR in recent memory stands out more starkly for its display of political turmoil, dysfunction, and polarization than this presidential election year. So it seems a good time for Christians to stop and attempt to gain perspective. In this article I provide a framework within which to think about our responsibilities as Christian citizens and suggest some possible action steps.

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of This World

The gospel of Jesus Christ radically relativizes the political realm. Against all those who have looked to politics for ultimate answers to the pressing problems of human his-

tory, Jesus claimed that their search was misguided. God’s kingdom is spiritual, not political. And God’s kingdom ultimately will be realized by spiritual, not political means. Moreover, if the claims of the political and the spiritual conflict, the Christian’s primary allegiance is owed to the spiritual.

Yet Jesus did not deny the political. He endorsed the payment of taxes. He opposed the Jewish religious leaders but not the Roman political regime. Elsewhere, the New Testament upholds civil authority as a buttress against evil and exhorts Christians to pray for their civil leaders.

So it is important to understand this nuanced biblical view of politics: politics mat-

ters but not ultimately. Political order, thus politics, is a vital human function. It is a necessary, but by itself, insufficient basis for human flourishing.

The Democratic State

Believers in biblical times had no experience with a democratic state so biblical examples of Christian political conduct have to be extrapolated for lessons for Christians living in a democracy. In doing so we do well to remember that democracy is the form of governance most congenial to a Christian world view.

But while democracy is admirable it is also fragile. To function effectively the dem-

ocratic state requires a citizenry that assumes the responsibilities inherent in their citizenship: to select and oversee their government; to submit to the law, to forge agreement on contested issues by advocacy, dialogue, and compromise; and to respect and protect the rights of those with whom they disagree. When its citizens no longer enact these virtues, democracy is at risk.

The Case For Political Activism

Some Christians eschew political entanglement altogether. They are silent citizens. One or more of the three following reasons are usually given. First, is the historical Anabaptist view that political quietism is a virtue, that believers are called to be separated from the world, that our time and energy should be devoted to kingdom work. Others justify their political disengagement by claiming that politics is just too messy; that it is rife with partisan power plays, big money, big egos, distortion and evasion, and sometimes outright graft and corruption. A third reason is the sense of futility, that one person has no chance to make a difference. Why bother: nothing will come of it.

But on closer inspection none of these positions is compelling. Consider the historical Anabaptist eschewal of politics. This may have made some sense in an era when these believers lived in rural agricultural ghettos, when they did not claim benefits provided by the government, and when they did not seek employment in the dominant economy where up to one third of the jobs are paid for in full or in part by government. But consider your average twenty-first century non-Amish Anabaptist. She readily accepts Medicare, Medicaid and/or Social Security. She may well have a government-funded job. If in business or the professions, she may have government for a customer or client. From such a place of deep engagement with the civic world, does it make any sense to fail to participate politically by claiming that one is to be separated from the world?

Similarly unpersuasive are the arguments that politics is too messy or that one's vote is meaningless. Democracy cannot be legitimate if citizens do not perform their electoral duties. The lower the voter turnout the more likely elections will be swung by highly motivated and well-financed special interest

groups or by demagogues or worse.

A Guide for Christian Political Engagement

Good government is to be prized because it helps restrain evil and promote good. Christian citizens should therefore do what they can to ensure good government. Proper political engagement is one way of being faithful.

But how to be a faithful Christian and citizen? Here are some suggestions:

- Have realistically modest expectations of the political realm. Do not expect any political party or leader to make America a Christian nation.
- Qualify your political party loyalty. Both the Republican and Democratic parties consist of broad, unwieldy coalitions. Be skeptical of 100 percent agreement with the policies of one party and 100 percent opposition to those of the other. Be a critical Democrat, a critical Republican.
- Maintain perspective. Our democracy is flawed, but flawed less systemically than alternative forms of government. Much remains that is good about our political system and our country.
- Be skeptical of the media, all media, right, left and center, but especially of radio and TV, the internet, and social media. It is unfortunate that in the quest for ratings and thus money, much of the media have prostituted themselves by becoming partisan, some subtly and others nakedly so. In becoming spokespeople for one side or the other, they inflame passions, demonize opponents, and foster polarization. Be especially careful with anonymous political content that circulates on the internet and social media. These sources often become echo chambers where like-minded partisans speak only to themselves. TV is useful in live coverage of the candidates. At least one is hearing from them directly. But even here TV often distorts, by broadcasting only sound bites or by selectively omitting from the full text. Most useful is the written press, the better papers of which provide more in-depth coverage as well as thoughtful analysis and opinion pieces. But even here, one needs to read both sides.
- Question simple answers to complex

problems.

- When voting, cast your ballot for that person/party who will best govern with special attention to those who are marginalized. Do not vote based only on self interest.
- Evaluate candidates on their character and temperament as well as their policies. Elected leaders have outsize influence in setting the moral tone of the country
- Consider more active political engagement than simply voting. Email your representative on important legislation, attend meetings with the candidates/elected officials, or join like-minded interest groups that can amplify your voice on legislative matters.
- Be a voice for civility and mutual respect in politics. Call out those who debase the political debate with distortion and venom. Speak up, but also listen and don't shout.

Christian citizens in a democracy have a responsibility to their country and to God to oppose evil and promote good through the political process as well as in their private lives and in their kingdom work through the church. But how they do so must be congruent with the attitudes and ethics of the gospel.

Roger Sider is retired from many years of practice as a psychiatrist. He and his wife attend the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Editor's Notes

Have you renewed for 2016? Send your check for \$15 (we welcome more!), payable to the Brethren in Christ Church U.S., to the editor (address on page 2). Or contribute online at bic-church.org/connect/publications/Shalom/default.asp.

Upcoming topics: The Fall 2016 edition will be on "Refugees and Displaced People." Topics for 2017 have not yet been chosen. Contact the editor if you'd like to write or have ideas for future topics.

Peacemaking in a Politically Toxic Season

By Keith Miller

THE EIGHTH OF November is bearing down on us with all the force of a ballistic missile, except that the impact will almost certainly be more widespread. Our presidential election features two candidates with some of the lowest approval ratings in history, which means that everyone is intent on highlighting how evil the other is.

Few subjects divide people and excite the emotions quite like U. S. politics, and this year the emotions are running higher than ever. Certainly, who leads our country and how it is led matters. How Christ followers view voting is also important. However, how we portray Christ in the election season matters more to me.

Allow me to confess something. I am a pastor, and I hate election season. I dread it as it approaches and I pray it moves by quickly. I am filled with sorrow when I see Christ followers make comments and approach dialogue in the same divisive way as so many others in our country. Name-calling, gross generalizations, and friendships that rise and fall with political persuasion are common in the American church.

Yet there is an opportunity for disciples of Jesus to show that the kingdom of God does not rise and fall based on American politics, and neither do our relationships. In order to do this, however, we must first decide if we are going to take the words of Scripture seriously:

- Blessed are the peacemakers.
- My kingdom is not of this world.
- If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.
- The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love.

Central to the discipleship of a Jesus follower is the call to be reconcilers. We are the ones who break down barriers, who imitate God's character as we approach broken people and relationships, and bring healing. We help people make peace with God, with one another, and with a damaged and hurting creation. We reject violence in all forms, knowing that love is a more transforming force than destruction. We look to the cross

and see the redemptive power of love for enemy. We don't just object to war, we become reconcilers in any situation where hatred begins to take root.

If this is true, then, what does it mean to be peacemakers in a politically toxic environment? I believe that in this highly divisive arena, our faithfulness may have much more impact than the vote we cast in November. I also believe that this is the calling of all followers of Jesus, whether they vote third party, Democrat, Republican, or abstain from voting altogether.

Being a peacemaker is uncomfortable. This is true, I suspect, because peacemaking at its core requires that I acknowledge the inherent humanity and value in my "adversary," whom I would otherwise be able to caricature and lob demeaning shaped stones at from a distance.

Our political environment right now is one of dehumanization. People, whether they are politicians with whom we don't agree, or simply voters who support them, become evil. It is no longer that I agree or disagree with your views, but that you are either good or bad. I am able to define you, and degrade your overall character because of your political view. Sisters and brothers, this must not be. We are disciples of a rabbi who spent his life breathing humanity back into people, not robbing them of it. Jesus broke down assumptions about other people to help us see the whole person and restore their humanity as infinitely worthy. While we find ourselves tempted to join everyone else and dehumanize the other in politics, Jesus chooses to rehumanize them. He forces us remember that, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, "within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good." Jesus teaches me to recognize that you are not the opinions you have, and even when I disagree, you bear the mark of a good God and deserve respect and understanding.

I'd like to see Christ followers agree to take a few steps this political season. First, let's model relationships that cross political boundaries. Let's listen to someone whose

views we don't share, ask questions, and seek understanding. It's incredibly hard to vilify someone when we see where they're coming from. And it's also incredibly refreshing to show the world that people can have meaningful relationships even when they don't agree on everything.

Second, let's use social media with extreme caution in this area. When we hastily post angry or sweeping statements on the internet, are we promoting a humble attitude of understanding, or fueling the fires of division and, dare I say, hatred? I think the people of Jesus should show far more discernment. I know a number of Christ followers for whom I have lost respect based on their hateful and divisive words on both sides of the political spectrum.

Finally, let's make sure our primary allegiance is to the kingdom of God rather than an American political kingdom. It is far easier to be a true peacemaker when we are not the ones with the weapons in our hands. Giving our allegiance to a political party links us with power and hinders the radical witness of a kingdom "that is not of this world."

I still don't like the election season. But I do believe that we have both a responsibility and an opportunity to show what love looks like in a new way during these months. On that Tuesday evening in November, when everyone is glued to their televisions watching the votes come in, my church will once again sit quietly together, breaking bread and drinking the cup. We will remind ourselves that Jesus is our hope and our Lord, but also that Jesus is our peacemaker, breaking down walls that might otherwise divide us. And as we sit in that circle, we are making a statement. We will not play the games of hatred and division that Jesus has already handled on the cross. We will love, no matter the cost. And we will see each other as children of God.

Keith Miller is a church-planting pastor at LifePath Church, a Brethren in Christ Church in Newark, DE.

Pastors, Politics, Partisanship, and Polarization

By Keith Tyson

PASTORING IN A hyper-politicized society like the present-day United States can be like walking a tightrope . . . or a plank . . . or in a minefield. Or it can be a wonderful opportunity to impart biblical truth to people who seek to be consistent Christ followers and good citizens at the same time. I choose the latter but feel the heat of the former.

A pastor walks the tightrope with his/her congregation because the political views of that congregation probably reflect the polarity of the political landscape. This can be a plank walk if either group feels slighted by the pastor's teaching and thus decides punishment must be meted out for "erroneous" teaching. For the pastor who worries more about what people think than what the Bible says, politics are as stressful as a stroll in a minefield. It does not have to be this way and I'll attempt to explain how I avoid being dragged down into politics.

Let me explain first what I mean by being dragged "down" as it may sound a bit arrogant and I mean no such thing. Rather, I mean that if followers of Jesus are to be in the world but not of it, politics is a necessary part of citizenship but not our defining characteristic. To be so concerned about the outcome of an election or the activity of the legislature that we forget this world is not our home, is to surrender our high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:14). The job of a pastor is to teach his/her church family that we are kingdom citizens first and good citizens of the world second.

In my years of ministry I have resisted taking a political stand from the pulpit. This is not because I am afraid to take a stand, but because it is not my place. This does not mean that I have not on a semi-regular basis addressed the often politicized issues of peace, justice, the sanctity of human life, and biblical marriage. Yes, they may be politicized, but I consider them to be moral issues. However, I have often found that people who disagree with my teaching on the afore-

mentioned issues see them as political and think I should tread carefully when preaching or dispensing pastoral wisdom concerning them. The implication has been I am endangering our church's tax-exempt status. One particular person comes to mind who was very quick to applaud me when my teaching was in line with their politics but equally quick to bring a hasty warning that I was on legal thin ice when it did not.

It is very easy to cast aspersions on one political party or the other or one candidate or the other—especially in the present political campaign in the U.S. I'd like to think that I prefer not to add to the increasingly inherent negativity that characterizes North American politics though at times I have felt like the Psalmist who wrote, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away..." (Psalm 32:3a (NIV)). Alas, I must admit, lately, in a state of incredulity, I've been guilty of adding my voice to the rancor. This, however, has been in private conversation or in Facebook posts/responses and never from the pulpit. I once had a parishioner who called the pulpit a "sacred desk" and he was right; it is a sacred desk and never a bully pulpit. I firmly believe that a pastor must resist allowing politics into his/her preaching.

Frequently at our church we receive mailings from groups suggesting that we place their "non-partisan" voters' guides on our literature table. I have determined that the term "non-partisan" means that technically the voters' guides are not from a particular political party, though they are always from a particular point of view that intentionally attempts to guide the reader toward the political views of the group. I've found that the questions that the groups put to candidates from which the guides were then compiled are from a political view that is decidedly contrary to our Brethren in Christ core values. So in the same way that I would never consider a request from a political candidate to address my congregation, I choose to discard the voters' guides and allow our congrega-

tion to prayerfully consider who they will vote for based on what they know from our study of the Word of God.

About that study of the Word: I endeavor to proclaim the Good News and pray my people gather from that, and their own study, how they, as Christ followers should live. I keep before them (and myself) that we are Christ followers first and their duties as citizens fall somewhere lower on the list. At our church we have just completed the study of the Brethren in Christ core values called *Who We Are*. I began with a talk on what our denominational logo represents and for the next ten weeks covered each of the core values using the book *Focusing Our Values* as a resource. The study was good preparation in the midst of an often raucous election year. While all the core values are biblical and very practical for living these days, the fourth (Following Jesus: We value wholehearted obedience to Christ Jesus through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit) and the tenth (Relying on God: We confess our dependence on God for everything, and seek him by living prayerfully) were especially helpful in teaching how to balance our kingdom and earthly citizenships.

Finally, being a pastor in a politically polarized culture takes much prayer and a determination to walk consistently and carefully. Jesus tells us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33, NIV). This is what works best for the shepherd who seeks to lead his people in the ways of the Lord.

Keith Tyson is pastor of the Ashland (OH) Brethren in Christ Church.

A Better Country

By Zach Spidel

I HAVE ALWAYS been fascinated by politics. As a kindergartener, I remember watching the first President Bush discuss the end of the Gulf War on TV. Not long after that, I watched in prime time as Ross Perot explained the need for a balanced national budget using a series of graphs and charts. I was absorbed by the endless inquiries that swirled around the Clinton White House as well as the violent convulsions of that period. But it wasn't until I became a Christian that my precocious fascination with politics became something more.

As a new Christian, I yearned with a passionate but still inchoate intensity to see Jesus' kingdom come on earth as it was in heaven. That passion was quickly shaped by the evangelical voices which I trusted at the time—voices that were united in their call for partisan political engagement. What did the kingdom come on earth look like? These voices not so subtly implied it was the Republican platform fully enacted. Surely the party that was right about abortion was also right about welfare, taxes, immigration, and all the rest. The Republican party was the "Christian" choice—the vehicle by which God's kingdom would come (back) to America.

Influenced by this false vision of God's kingdom while in high school, I angrily debated other students and several teachers on topics such as affirmative action (which I vociferously opposed), tax cuts, rap music, welfare, and, of course, abortion—and I did all this in the name of Jesus. I represented Jesus not by offering grace to others, but by offering a set of policy prescriptions for the American government. If you agreed, you were one of the righteous, if you disagreed, I wrote you off.

I look back with shame, and a determined repentance, on that time in my life as Jesus' follower. I wanted to see his kingdom come—my intentions were good—but I ended up being part of the never-ending struggle for political power over a specific worldly kingdom: America. Rather than reflect the values of King Jesus, who died for

his enemies and showed mercy to all, I argued with passion for the war in Iraq in 2003. I knew America was God's country and that radical Muslims were America's enemies. I knew from the Bible that God waged holy wars against his enemies and that he would come in violence at the end of the age to kill his enemies, and until then, I knew Christian America had to fight Jesus' enemies for him until he came back to finish them off.

I was blind. I did not know that the Jews of Jesus' day—Zealots, peasants, and Pharisees alike—knew many of the same things I did, and had their knowledge shattered by the better wisdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ. They knew that Israel was God's country and that the Romans were Israel's enemies. They knew that God waged holy wars against Israel's enemies and that he would send his Messiah to kill all those enemies at the end of the age. In the meantime, they knew it was up to them to hate, and, when possible, kill their Roman oppressors, until God's Messiah would come to finish the job.

So, when Jesus came willing to embrace not just Jewish sinners (prostitutes), but also those who actively aided the enemy (tax collectors), and not just active collaborators, but the enemies themselves (his praise for the Roman centurion, for instance), the majority of God's people at that time knew he couldn't be the Messiah. He was on the wrong side of their culture war; or, at least, he refused to pick a side—he would eat with a Pharisee one day and a tax collector the next. He preached a moral rigor higher than that of the Pharisees one day (be perfect!) and preached unmerited grace and unilateral divine forgiveness the next.

It was ultimately this example of Jesus himself, along with some key Christian friends and mentors I met while in college, that led me to repentance for the ways in which I had politicized the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God does not look like the Republican or the Democratic party platform enacted. Thank God, it's so much bet-



ter than that! And the methods by which that kingdom comes are not the cynical methods of electoral politics, or the violent methods of international conflict. Rather, the only method of the kingdom is the cross—loving self-sacrifice that embraces not just friends, but strangers, foreigners, and even enemies.

We are called not to squabble over how to run the kingdom of America, but to live as citizens of the kingdom of God in exile. We are seeking a better country—our true home—and are called to live according to its standards and by its laws even as we sojourn here. Our churches are embassies for God's kingdom in the midst of America's many cultural struggles, offering peace to combatants on both sides. We recognize, for instance, the pernicious realities of racism in our country, especially the harm caused to black communities by flaws in our justice system, even as we refuse to demonize police and to make scapegoats of them. We proclaim that black lives matter and stand with our African American brothers and sisters, even as we lament with the families of those police officers recently murdered. Our culture says you must pick a side, but we invite both sides to discover that they are loved by Jesus and that they grieve his heart in so far as they demonize one another. Let's work and struggle and strive together as Christians, not to take America back for God, but to invite all Americans to trade in their earthly citizenship here for citizenship in the country of Jesus, whom we love and serve.

Zach Spidel is the pastor of The Shepherd's Table congregation in Dayton, OH.

Global Citizenship: *Seven Thousand Miles from Home*

By Lois Saylor



THIS PAST APRIL, I traveled with nine other Brethren in Christ leaders on a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) learning tour to Africa. We spent one week in Zimbabwe and one week in Zambia learning, touring, and meeting with people serving in MCC programs. After three flights totaling over 24 hours, our group of ten sat expectantly and maybe cautiously in the MCC's city office in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, ready to learn.

We learned that MCC and the Brethren in Christ have been associated with each other for the majority of MCC's existence and that the partnership is active and vibrant in Zimbabwe where MCC works almost exclusively with the Brethren in Christ Church (BICC). We later learned that this close relationship is also true in Zambia. In fact, BICC bishops of both countries spoke of the two organizations almost as one or at least like a glove fit to the hand.

As we drove in the Bulawayo area visiting interesting sites, we learned that through MCC we help fund a small center where physically and mentally challenged children can sit and learn in a loving environment, where they are not outcasts but the center of attention. We learned that a SALT (Serving and Learning Together) volunteer works at an old hotel turned into a center for sexually abused girls where the young women can find safety and healing through counseling, education, and the down to earth chores of raising chickens, rabbits, goats, and vegetables that they eat and sell to support the school. They even tend worm farms in old bathtubs to produce a liquid fertilizer that they use in their gardens. We drove to Mtshabezi touring Ekuphileni Bible Institute, a BICC theological school training pastors, and the Mtshabezi hospital that runs a clinic, an operating theater, and hospital services including delivering more than 20 babies a month and monitoring over 1,800 HIV patients. We also visited two homes with the BICC Omama (meaning women) group who serve local woman and widows.

We heard about peace initiatives in which

police officers are trained in alternatives to violence in policing, and about conservation farming programs that help sustenance farmers and commercial farmers create more productive fields especially in the crippling drought. We learned more about young adult programs, which allow young Zimbabwean to travel to many countries to gain training for their educational skills and to serve others. At the BICC Bulawayo offices we met with Bishop Sindah Ngulube who leads the Zimbabwe BICC. He shared how closely the BICC works with MCC to do the work of the church and the high value of the partnership.

We left Zimbabwe and walked across the border to Zambia via a bridge crossing the Zambezi River at Victoria Falls. The falls and the baboons were in full force as the falls roared and soaked us completely and the baboons tried to steal our bags and food and bounced around on the top of our vehicles.

Approaching Macha Mission, a rural center unlike the city of Bulawayo and administered by the Zambian BICC, we turned off the paved roads and bounced along hard packed dirt roads contoured and rutted by the flow of heavy rains. We depended on the driver's skill in knowing which side of the road made for the best path. In Macha we walked around one of the schools for grades 1-9, the Macha hospital and clinic, the nursing school, the Macha Research Trust doing important work on malaria and HIV, and worshipped with the Macha BICC. Between Macha and Choma, we visited farmers growing tomatoes, corn, and sunflowers who were using conservation farming techniques taught by BICC Compassion Ministry workers.

As we visited with Bishop Thuma Hamukang'andu in Choma a van left the compound carrying MCC HIV Kits that the local BICC would distribute. It was a perfect picture of the cooperation between the two distinct yet partnering organizations. Also in Choma we visited a BICC basic school where we met Brooke Strayer a SALTER from The Meetinghouse Carlisle (PA) who is

working with Peace Clubs in the school to teach children, teachers, and parents healthy relational skills. We also visited a Choma prison where the Peace Club coordinator successfully translated the materials for the prisons with great effect for the prisoners, guards, families, and the communities when the prisoners are released. Our last stop in Zambia was Lusaka where we met teachers who told stories of relational healing and health as students, teachers, and parents put Peace Clubs principles into action.

In general, MCC works in the areas of relief, development, and peacemaking envisioning "communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another, and creation." What I learned that was truly new to me was that supporting MCC in a general way is also supporting our Brethren in Christ sisters and brothers directly. The take-away from the trip after the people we met and stories they told, is that MCC and the Brethren in Christ Church in the U.S. together are impacting the world for Christ and changing lives in areas of personal safety and development, food security, and reducing violence by improving relationships. As the BICC overseer in Lusaka told us, "When a grandmother receives blankets (provided by MCC and distributed by BICC) she does not see MCC; she sees Jesus." Then he reminded us that whatever we do for the least to these, we do for Jesus.

MCC does much needed relief work that we often hear about in a crisis, but I was particularly impressed with the development and peace initiatives that we see less often and that change lives and demonstrate the call to do justice in the name Christ.

Lois Saylor serves on the editorial committee for Shalom! She is also an editor for Equipping for Ministry and serves on their board. She and her husband are members of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

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Preaching Our Principles (Not Our Politics)

By David Brubaker

WHAT SHOULD CONGREGATIONAL leaders say in the midst of a toxic and omnipresent political season? Either they can wade into the fray or avoid political issues altogether. But there is a third path that is available—preaching our principles but not our politics. Here are three principles that most guide my voting choices (and hopefully my daily behavior as well).

1. *God has a special concern for the most vulnerable and marginalized in a society, and expects those who revere these texts to act on that concern.*

This is reflected in Jesus' clear words in "the sheep and the goats' passage" in Matthew 25 as well as in the frequent calls of the Hebrew prophets to care for the widows, orphans, and "strangers" (immigrants) in the land. In a patriarchal culture predicated on a shared ethno-religious identity, these were the three groups of human beings who were most vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment. In the U.S. today, such vulnerable groups would include the LGBT community, Muslims, and recent immigrants and refugees. How do the clear commands of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures shape my own principles and practices in response to these communities, as well as my voting choices?

2. *"Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can*

do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction" (Martin Luther King, Jr.).

I agree with Dr. King that the vicious cycle of hate and violence is only accelerated when we respond with hate and violence. I therefore embrace an ethic of nonviolence in my personal life, and I pray and work for a society and a world that does the same. Questions remain, however. What does it look like to practice active nonviolence in both word and deed in my own relationships? How should a society respond to gun violence at home and religiously-justified violence against civilians abroad? What role does a local congregation have in working to reduce violence in its own community and society?

3. *"The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it"* (Psalm 24).

Along with concern for the marginalized and a commitment to nonviolence, I hold this concept of "stewardship" (rather than "ownership") of the earth as a core principle. I see human beings as stewards of this magnificent planet. We are not to exercise "dominion" over the earth in terms of "dominating" it; we are rather to care for and

sustain it.

These are the three major ethical principles I strive to embrace—concern for the marginalized, a commitment to nonviolence, and care for the earth. Because these principles are so difficult to embody, I believe that we can only embrace the practical implications of such principles in the context of a community of shared values. This is why I am dedicated to my local congregation. A healthy faith community provides regular opportunities to both name our deepest principles and to reflect on the daily challenges of living them out.

What about you? What are your core principles? How are you living them out, or at least striving to, every day? How might these principles influence your political choices in the coming months? Who comprises the community that assists and challenges you in articulating and embodying your principles?

David Brubaker grew up as a pastor's son in the Brethren in Christ Church and is now an associate professor of organizational studies at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA. This article is condensed by permission from the author from one that first appeared on the website of the Congregational Consulting Group.