

POLITICAL OR BIBLICAL? IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

First Congregational Church of Meredith

March 23, 2025

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I heard a story once. I don't know if it's true or not. You decide...

Miriam and Hiram Walker were walking home from church one Sunday morning in their hometown of Smallville, Kansas. Hiram said, "Miriam, I'm growing tired of that pastor always belly-aching about the government doing this or doing that. He's just too political for my blood. I don't think there's any room for politics in church. I think he's violating that Constitutional amendment that separates church and state. I'm thinking we should try that new church over there in Bigtown. You know the one that has that small band that's always playing music before the service. What do they call it? Praise Band, that's it. Heard they have a bald-headed drummer who flings his stick into air and every now and then drops one? What do you think?" Wanna check it out?

Well, Hiram, "I hear ya. That is a pretty popular place these days and people always come out happy and smiling. I've heard people say at our knitting club they think that drummer guy drops the sticks on purpose. But, yeah I do wonder if our Pastor should be preaching that stuff, too. I'd just like to go to church and hear about Jesus, be with friends, pray and go to coffee hour. I want to walk out feeling good about life and not all beat up. There's just so much going on these days, and we keep hearing about this government stuff all day long.; even when we sit down to have supper while watching the national news with Penelope Periscope. It does get to be a bit much. And, I wonder about that "separation

of church and state” that is in the Constitution. But, at the same time I find myself thinking aren’t those sermons Rev. Lawrence gives supposed to be about helping us understand what Jesus would do? About how the Bible supports the hungry, thirsty, the sick, the homeless, the widow, the outcasts and such? I don’t like feeling uncomfortable, but those sermons do get me to thinking about what I can be doing, and probably should be doing to help make the country better. How is this Kingdom of God supposed to happen without us doing our part? I guess maybe I do like those sermons... they make think that I can do more rather than just sit around coffee hour buzzing about the pastor. So, I don’t know Hiram...maybe we ought to give it a bit more time and try to understand what’s the best way to follow Jesus.”

“Maybe someday a preacher will come along and help us understand the difference between a church being political or biblical.”

Well, what a coincidence!

What Miriam and Hiram probably don’t know is the “Separation of Church of State” they say is in the Constitution, isn’t, at least those words. What is in the Constitution is the very first amendment that serves to establish the structures that identify the role of government and what rights its citizens have.

That first amendment set out people’s rights be protected from government interventions that could limit the voice of the people, by establishing freedom of speech, freedom to gather, freedom of the press and freedom to worship where one chooses to.

The latter piece is what is often confusing. It’s been interpreted as the separation of Church and State, but specifically, its goal was to

make clear that the United States government would not create a national church and could not intervene in the choices its citizens make on where to carry out their religious proclivities.

In addition to not being able to force citizens to worship at a state sponsored church, it details that the United States is not, by its founding, a legally formed Christian country. In other words, the United States is not founded as Christian. Most of its citizens claim to be Christian meaning most of its voters are Christian. But by Constitutional authority the country is not and was not established as a Christian Country. The first amendment makes this so.

So, where does the idea that churches shouldn't be or couldn't be political come from. One of the ideas is the distinction between the terms political and partisan. Politics is the process by which rules and laws are created for the orderliness, stability, growth and safety of a population, presumably for the greater good. Politics tend to focus on national defense, economic issues, human rights and other ideologies that affect the well-being of the population. Partisanship is loyalty to a political party or leader in which the ideology of the partisan often does not allow for compromise with their political opponent on most issues. Often the effect of this tenacity severely limits the concept of a "greater good," creating division rather than unity.

Further muddying the waters of "church and state" is the Internal Revenue Service, whose existence comes from the political process and, at the time of its inception, a non-partisan Congressional agreement. It was the IRS that declared that no church that is exempt from paying federal income and property taxes can endorse any candidate for political office.

**It is possible that the misperception of the difference between politics and partisanship, along with the IRS making it illegal for any church to endorse political candidates has caused Miriam and Hiram's misunderstanding of what is appropriate for ministers to preach. But to be clear, neither the Constitution nor the IRS prohibits churches from free speech and advocacy of their biblical understanding.**

So, while some church goers admonish ministers and churches for what they preach, many others would say the role of the church is to sometimes challenge and other times support what governments do or don't do.

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Some interesting history on the intersection of politics and the bible: In ancient Egypt, long before the name Jesus came off the lips of Middle Easterners, kings were considered gods. They were considered not just mortal leaders but reincarnations of gods with divine powers. Think of the King Tut and other Pharaohs as examples.

Kings of that time were subject to the scorn of the Hebrew Prophets. The bible tells the story of Nathan confronting King David, condemning his adultery with Bathsheba and sending her husband to his death on the battle field. Nathan delivered a parable to the King condemning the action of a rich man taking the only lamb from a poor man. David was incensed hearing that someone would steal such a priceless part of the man's life. He didn't realize it was about him until Nathan then told the King, he was the rich man in the story.

Amos cried out the famous words: "let justice roll on like a river," when confronting the king.

Isaiah, Jeremiah and others consistently spoke out against the injustices perpetrated by the political leaders of their time.

Then there was Moses, who he later confronted the Pharaoh so he could lead his captive people out of Egypt. "Let my people go, he demanded."

Then, there's Jesus confronting the powers-that-be to uphold the dignity, rights and dreams of the marginalized. Think of him challenging the status quo through the upside-down idea he preached in the Sermon on the Mount: the meek shall inherit the earth, blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called 'sons of God'; blessed are those who are persecuted for their righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. He also said, "what you do to the least of these you do to me," when talking about the hungry, thirsty, lame, homeless and those in prison. And then there's "Give unto Caesar that which is his. Give unto God what is God's."

Later were the abolitionists who invoked bible stories to make the changes that helped end slavery.

And the spirit lives on in our lifetimes: The Rev. Dr. MLK Jr. leading the charge for the civil rights movement, Archbishop Desmond Tutu advocating for equality and dismantling apartheid; Archbishop Oscar Romero giving his Salvadoran brothers and sisters hope through his willingness to stand up against their oppression and the human rights violations of their government; and today, Reverend Dr. William Barber leading the poor people's movement, a movement that is neither left nor right, not democrat or republican but seeks all voices for the uplifting the dignity of the poor and marginalized.. So many religious leaders speaking the truth to power,

speaking the gospel of hope to those whose voices have been extinguished. Political or Biblical?

There is often a collision between politics and the bible, especially when the biblical rights of the vulnerable appear to be extinguished by the political process. When politics and biblical views collide, there needs to be engagement by churches in politics. Part of what makes this difficult is there are many different interpretations of some bible passages. There's not often a clear and uniformly agreed upon interpretation of scripture and that is precisely the reason there are thousands of Christian denominations in the United States. Each church, each pastor in mainline churches who typically has an advanced educational degree in divinity studies, including biblical languages, contextual analysis and in-depth studies of theology have arrived at their biblical understandings through rigorous study.

But the pastor, as the church's spiritual leader, is also charged with fostering a safe and healthy environment that allows for there to be differing scriptural understandings. Those differences need to be thoughtfully, generously and respectfully debated. Well-founded disagreement needs to be encouraged, but people being disagreeable must not.

There is a role for being political and being biblical. Both need to keep the other from abuse of their power, neither of them being silenced. Rather the role of a church is to stimulate conversation while helping congregants to search for answers on how do we follow Jesus? What does it mean to be a follower? What do I stand for when I say I am a Christian? What does it mean to love one another as I have loved you? What's mine to do? Why do I really go to church? What do I want to get out of it? How

does my church's understanding of the bible and its fidelity to God translate into words and actions by the congregation?

The message I hope that has been conveyed today is one of openness. All of us need to be open to the very things that make us uncomfortable and challenge our understanding of our world. We need to accept we are limited in our perceptions of life, because our personal experiences are limited. The world is too big, too complex to fully know, so being curious, open to new ideas, and open to new people are critical to the unity of all God's people.

We need to challenge ourselves to get to know the "other," the ones who scare us because they are different, and too often judge w/o knowing. We need churches to help us come down from our platforms of superiority and recognize that most of us have never lived in a foreign country, never been homeless, never wrestled with our sexuality or gender identity. Most of us have never been abused physically, emotionally, sexually. Most of us have never had to be in a position where we were the immigrant fleeing for our lives, never witnessed our spouse being raped by soldier, or watched our child be tossed into the air to land on the end of bayonet. Most of us have never had our ancestral land stolen from us. Most of us have never feared starvation, never feared diseases, nor had government or rebel troops invade, conquer and destroy our homes. Most of us have never been used as human shields, or been pawns in a game of chicken conducted by foreign governments. What would that be like? How would that change our ideas of politics and the bible?

Life, for many, is filled with heartache beyond imagination, we need deeper and more authentic, bible-driven conversations, born in compassion, fueled by a desire for unity rather than to simply argue

to be right. We need a shared goal of reclaiming our birthright to speak our truth, claim our dignity and fulfil our inspirations.

The church must lead the way with pastors advocating for justice, righteousness and the common good, while challenging injustice, corruption and oppression. It requires prophetic courage by all of us to build the world Jesus and others have demanded we live. It requires ministerial sensitivities to the lives of all people in the congregation, engaging in political processes, when necessary, but avoiding partisanship. Churches must advocate for human rights, dignity of all and draw encouragement from biblical stories and those who came before us.

Together, let us accept we are all God's children, accept our oneness, accept God's desire for peace and wholeness. Let us be examples of this so that when we are called to challenge political policy and one another we do so in ways that are decent, respectful and courageous, while feeling like we are touching the hand of God.

There is not a choice between being political or biblical. It is both. In that way, one day, you may hear Miriam and Hiram say, "You know... I'm glad we hung around."

Amen