

# Discipleship demands engagement with society

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AUSTIN—Christian discipleship requires Christians to engage the culture, and that includes political involvement, two social analysts told a Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission conference in Austin.

Gabe Lyons, author of *The Next Christians* and founder of the Q learning community, and Vincent Bacote, director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College and author of *The Political Disciple: A Theology of Public Life*, spoke at the CLC Advocacy Day event Feb. 28 at Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin.

Participants spent the day in general sessions and workshops, preparing to visit lawmakers at the Texas Capitol the next morning.

## **Barna Research shows reason for concern**

Only 42 percent of Americans have confidence in religious institutions, an 18 percent drop since 2007, Lyons noted, citing a study by Barna Research.

“Many Americans associate Christian faith with extremism,” he said. “They believe it is bad for society and harmful to your children.”

To nobody’s surprise, 93 percent of Americans believe using religion to justify violence is extremist, Lyons noted. But he also pointed out 60 percent believe trying to convert others to one’s faith is evidence of extremism, and 52 percent say belief that same-sex relationships are morally wrong is extremist.

## **Demonstrate ‘good faith’**



Gabe Lyons Christians historically have held counter-cultural views about sex, money and power, and Christ's followers have a responsibility to remain biblically faithful and loving toward people with different values, Lyons asserted. They should demonstrate "good faith" instead of "bad religion" in the public square, guided by three actions—love, believe and live, he said.

Good faith finds its basis in good news—the gospel—not in despair and fear, he noted.

"Fear is not a gospel message," he said. "Fear is the tool of Satan."

### **Lenses to view potential political engagement**

Lyons suggested five lenses through which Christians should view societal issues and questions to ask when considering political engagement:

- *Theology.* "What does God's word and the church's wisdom say about this?"

- *Ministry*. “What is the proper pastoral response to people living in a fallen world?”
- *Relationships*. “How do I engage friends and family with whom I disagree?”
- *Politics*. “What government policies, however imperfect, empower human flourishing?”
- *Public square*. “What is the appropriate relationship between personal conviction and daily interaction with those holding different beliefs?”

### **Follow both Great Commissions**

“Whole-life discipleship” means a Christian’s identity as a follower of Christ “ought to matter every hour of the week,” Bacote asserted. That includes time spent in the workplace, the classroom, the marketplace and the public square—not just moments devoted to Bible study, prayer, worship or evangelism, he said.

Most evangelical Christians know Christ’s Great Commission in Matthew 28—to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe what Jesus commanded, he said. But too few recognize the first Great Commission in Genesis 1—to exercise dominion over all God’s creation, he insisted.

God pronounced his creation “very good” in Genesis, and he underscored its value through the Incarnation, when he entered into human history in the Person of Jesus Christ, he continued.

“Jesus taking on a body is a way of God saying: ‘You’d better believe creation is very good. So good, in fact, I’m coming to reclaim it,’” Bacote said.

### **Call to a ‘larger sense of Christian mission’**



Vincent Bacote That awareness calls God's people to "a larger sense of Christian mission than what we usually talk about," including political engagement, he said.

"Politics is not your enemy," he said. "It is how we manage our lives together—hopefully with more, rather than less, human flourishing."

Christians should temper their expectations about politics, he insisted. While America is exceptional in some respects, it remains imperfect, he said.

The United States does not have a covenant relationship with God, and Bacote labeled the expectation that America should look identical to the kingdom of God as "delusional and potentially idolatrous."

### **Avoid triumphalism and despair**

Christians should avoid an attitude of triumphalism, he asserted.

"The best things we do are always penultimate, not ultimate," Bacote said. "We don't see with perfect clarity. Whatever we do is subject to revision."

At the same time, Christians never should surrender to despair or quit

trying to improve society, he insisted. Rhetoric during the most recent presidential campaign led some to suggest an “electoral apocalypse was at hand” and was creating a situation “so bad even God can’t handle it,” he said.

“Christians ought to be a hopeful people,” he said. “We should never give up.”