

Editorial: Should your pastor talk about politics?

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When I was a pastor, one of the church members stopped by my office one afternoon to talk. She had a question, something about my thoughts of then-President Barack Obama.

I tended to pause before answering such questions, but it didn't make any difference this time. Before I could even begin to pause, she was responding to her own question.

Sometimes, people just need to work things out for themselves. Sometimes.

Months later, she apologized to me, "I shouldn't have asked you that." She thought she wasn't supposed to ask me about politics. She assumed I voted for Obama or that I thought the complete opposite of her about him. In any event, we weren't going to hold it against each other, then or ever. We genuinely cared for and liked each other.

I laughed and told her she might be surprised to know I don't vote the way she thought.

I'd love to talk with her about politics again, but she's not concerned about politics anymore.

Politics is an inseparable part of life here

"Politics is what happens between people when they try to get something done together," wrote the authors of *The Politics of Ministry*.

Consider that definition for a moment.

Isn't it true that wherever two or more people gather together, politics is there with them? From the most mundane to the most significant—from dinner options to trade negotiations—we endlessly are trying to get something done together.

We are interdependent—like it or not. We rely on each other for what we need. We bring our own interests and expectations to the exchange, and we depend on each other to be trustworthy, ethical and fair in the process.

Seemingly competing needs, interests and expectations and what we take to be trustworthy, ethical and fair makes politics the minefield we so often find it to be. My former church member was wrestling with all of this and came to me to talk it out, but she thought she wasn't supposed to ask me about politics.

If her pastor couldn't talk about politics, where could she have gone for spiritual guidance?

Politics in the Bible

The Bible talks about politics all the time. Here are just a few examples.

When all the people spoke one language, communication was easy. They agreed to come together and build a tower to reach heaven and “make a name for themselves” (Genesis 11:4). God saw it and confused their language, and the people quit cooperating and scattered.

Pharaoh was afraid of the possibilities of a growing and thriving Hebrew population in Egypt (Exodus). So, he enslaved the Hebrew people. God responded, albeit after a significant delay, by overwhelming Pharaoh and freeing Israel.

Rehoboam was approached by an assembly of Israelites who asked him to lighten the load his father had placed on them (1 Kings 12). Rehoboam sought the advice of his father's establishment but didn't like what they said. He turned to a group of young men unspoiled by years in politics, who said to tighten the screws. Rehoboam did, and Israel rebelled.

Some men brought a paralyzed man to be healed by Jesus but couldn't get through the door because of the crowd. So, they took the paralyzed man up on the roof and lowered him "into the middle of the crowd," and Jesus healed him ... and forgave his sins (Luke 5:17-26).

When it was time to select someone to take Judas Iscariot's place among the apostles, Peter established the criteria, and two men were nominated. To decide between the two men, the group prayed and cast lots, and Matthias was selected (Acts 1:21-26).

Each of these biblical stories is a record of how people engaged needs, interests, expectations, trust, ethics and fairness in real-time. Interestingly, they don't provide once and for all answers, which leaves us looking to people like pastors for spiritual guidance when we, too, are wrestling with things in real-time.

Talking about politics in the Bible

In addition to recounting how people dealt with political issues, the Bible includes accounts of how people dealt with politicians.

The ancient prophets repeatedly chastised the national leadership and foretold its doom. They didn't win many friends for it, either. Some even lost their lives.

John the Baptist and Jesus both called the religious leaders a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7, 12:34, 23:33).

Jesus regularly chastised Israel's religious leaders for being hypocrites. Matthew 23 records a particularly strong denunciation of the religious establishment.

Jesus called Herod "that fox," a reference to Herod's unscrupulous and licentious ways (Luke 13:31-35). In the next breath, he condemned Jerusalem—Israel's Washington, D.C.—as a place of bloodshed.

Jesus didn't leave any better impression among the religious leaders than the prophets did before him.

In each of the examples above, Jesus and the prophets made critical statements about the policies of those in leadership.

Your pastor isn't Jesus and may not be a prophet, but your pastor is the person your church believes is called by God to lead your church. You also may believe your pastor speaks a word from God each Sunday, a high view of pastors, to be sure.

As such a person, your pastor may have a word from God about politics and politicians. The criteria by which to judge your pastor's words is not whether they square with anyone's opinions but whether your pastor's words square with Scripture.

Pastors should talk about politics

When I was a pastor, some expected me to say certain things about President Obama, namely to be critical of his policies. A couple of years into President Trump's term, some expect me to say certain things about him, namely not to be critical of his policies. In either case, if I couldn't say anything bad about Obama, I was expected to say nothing at all, and if I can't say anything good about Trump, I'm expected to say nothing at all.

Seems like a smart person simply would say nothing at all.

Pastors are counseled to avoid such whiplash by being smart enough to avoid politics altogether, but to bracket politics out of the discussion is to pretend the truth of Christianity has no bearing on “what happens between people when they try to get something done together.”

Furthermore, to strike politics off the list of things the pastor can talk about begs the question, “And what is next?” Should the pastor also not talk about greed, pride, gossiping, anger, jealousy, selfishness, and the like, especially since these undergird so much of our politics?

Should your pastor talk about politics? In the pulpit?

This seems like asking if your pastor should talk about money or sex ... in the pulpit.

Pastors should talk about politics. To talk about politics, they will need to name some names and specify some policies. They need to talk about politics in casual conversation, in prayer meetings, in Bible studies and from the pulpit. But what the pastor should say and when? That I can't say.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP). The views expressed are solely those of the author.