

# Guest editorial: Election- year ministry tension

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Across more than 35 years as a pastor, I found presidential election years among some of the hardest times in which to find a healthy balance between a prophetic engagement with the culture and a pastoral sensitivity to congregational unity. Since I'm no longer serving a local church, I admit to experiencing relief—but also confess to feeling some guilt—that I don't have the responsibility or opportunity to lead a congregation during this challenging season.

Here are ways I tried to honor the prophetic-pastoral tension in my ministry at the sometimes-treacherous intersection of the political and ecclesial realms.

1. I aimed for what Richard John Neuhaus called “critical patriotism” in *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. It's a style of citizenship that stresses Christians' ultimate loyalty is to the kingdom of God. To be a patriot means to love one's country enough to hold it accountable to Jesus' vision of God's beloved community characterized by justice, mercy and peace.

Critical patriots know no nation is perfect, not even our own. We also know recognizing its imperfections does not necessarily blind us to what is good about the United States.

It's undeniable that, like every nation, the United States is, from time to time, guilty of greed, corruption, dishonesty and violence. That's why I resonate with the stanza in “America the Beautiful” that includes a prayer for national reformation: *America! America! / God mend thine every flaw / Confirm thy soul in self-control, /*

*Thy liberty in law.*

It's also true, however, that at its best, the United States strives, as Martin Luther King urged us, to "live out the true meaning of its creed that all (human beings) are created equal." The conviction that all people share an essential freedom, dignity and equality, along with the effort to reflect those qualities in our common life, is a powerful source of hope for which it is right to be grateful.

For me, then, critical patriotism means facing honestly what is flawed about our country, while also expressing thanks for what is good, even noble, about it.

**2.** I taught that political loyalties are not ultimate. As is often said: "God is neither an American, nor a Democrat, nor a Republican." For followers of Jesus, all political parties, positions and platforms are provisional and partial. They "fall short of the glory of God."

**3.** I claimed the most effective witness the church can bear is being the church simply but compellingly, and not by seeking, attaining and exercising secular political power.

Too often, we assume the best way to have an impact on culture is by means of partisan political activity. I think that assumption is a mistake, because it reduces culture to politics, and it overestimates the role of government in the tone, texture, values and practices of the culture. Culture is far broader than the arenas of politics and government, and there are other and more faithful ways to engage it with the will and way of Jesus.

Those ways all have their source and sustenance in the regular worship of God. As Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp said in *People of the Truth: The Power of the Worshipping Community in the Modern World*: "By praising God, we displace from the center of our attention and ambition all

competing allegiances—personal, political, economic or otherwise. Personally, we admit that our ego is not the pivot point of the universe. Politically, we set aside any political system’s explicit or implicit claim that the future of the world depends on it. Economically, we disavow the assertion that material wealth and class standing constitute genuine riches. True praise, then, immediately reveals false idols.”

Gathering for worship as an alternative “polity,” and enacting what we experience there in our missional engagement with the culture are the most radical “political” practices of the church.

In worship, week by week, we allow the Living Word, Jesus, to “transform us by the renewal of our minds”—a process of having our limited vision of the Kingdom expanded, our confidence in love deepened and our passion for justice restored.

In worship, we also make promises and covenants in a commitment-phobic age. We practice stewardship and generosity in a culture of rampant materialism and excessive consumerism. We remember God has given us our lives to us as gifts, a remembrance at odds with our society’s myth of the “self-made” person.

These practices put us in creative tension with the ways of our culture, a tension which energizes and makes more effective our missional engagement of it. They are also crucial for congregational leaders who are navigating a hard season like this one.

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