

Voices: Baptists' faithful witness in the public square

January 28, 2025

As the Constitutional Convention came to an end in 1787, Elizabeth Willing Powel reportedly asked Benjamin Franklin, “Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?”

Franklin replied, “A republic, if we can keep it.”

Over the past two centuries, Americans have lived in the middle of the “if,” striving for a more perfect union, while wrestling with slavery, war, Jim Crow, sexism, xenophobia, corruption, Christian nationalism and terrorism.

The work is not finished, nor is success inevitable. It requires constant work and diligence, compromise and compassion.

As [President John F. Kennedy said](#): “Democracy is never a final achievement. It is a call to effort, to sacrifice and a willingness to live and to die in its defense.”

In other words, democracy is hard.

While the church is not dependent on any type of government in order to flourish, our support of democracy and work for liberty—including religious liberty—is a calling we must strive toward continually.

Politics and polarization

Every four years, we elect a president, and every four to eight years, we observe a transfer of power, not just from one person to the next, but often from one political party to the other. This process cannot be taken for

granted.

As we witnessed in 2021, it took the willingness and courage of multiple individuals to maintain this peaceful transfer of power by placing the country over partisanship. We hope that experience was not a harbinger of the future, but we also must admit it may be, especially following the recent pardons of those who committed previous political violence.

Our society is so polarized due to the omnipresence and misapplied role of politics.

As David Brooks writes in *How to Know a Person*: “Over the past decade, everything has become politicized. Churches, universities, sports, food selection, movie award shows, late-night comedy—they have all turned into political arenas ...

“Political movements these days are fueled largely by resentment, by a person or a group’s feelings that society does not respect or recognize them,” he continues. “The goal of political and media personalities is to produce episodes in which their side is emotionally validated and the other side is emotionally shamed.

“The person practicing the politics of recognition is not trying to formulate domestic policies or to address this or that social ill; he is trying to affirm his identity, to gain status and visibility, to find a way to admire himself.”

We must change this.

Over-identification with politics

Religion has become identified increasingly with politics, leading to an unhealthy union between the two, which inevitably leads to greater political and religious instability and to a compromise of religious values.

As Steve Bezner writes in *Your Jesus is Too American*: “[History] teaches us that when the church and government are too closely related, the witness of the church is almost always corrupted and the spiritual health of the corresponding nation struggles.”

We can hear the echo of Jesus’ words: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

Consequently, we must reorient the growing confusion of priorities between government, politics, faith and freedom, focusing again on the faithful calling to religious liberty for all.

How do we do this? How do we move away from the politics of “me” to that of a healthy service of others?

Baptist contribution to politics

For Baptists, our historic commitment to religious liberty and separation of church and state remains of paramount importance for our faith and our country, providing a way for the polarization and proper perspective of religion and faith to be properly applied.

Because of pluralism and the importance of equality for all, the striving for freedom of conscience and free exercise of religion must be properly emphasized and strengthened.

We must recommit ourselves to biblical principles and ideals that will lead not only to a freer church and state, but also a stronger and healthier church and state, not one obsessed with temporal political power, but one driven by love for all.

The church, rather than acting as a blind partisan, should be a prophetic witness, speaking truth to power, defending the marginalized and neglected, even when those words clash with governmental authority.

As Gregory Boyd wrote in *The Myth of a Christian Nation*: “When God flexes his omnipotent muscle, it doesn’t look like Rambo or the Terminator—it looks like Calvary! And living in this Calvary-like love moment by moment, in all circumstances and in relation to all people, is the sole calling of those who are aligned with the kingdom that Jesus came to bring.”

Through all our faults, Baptists’ positive contributions to American religious life—namely, separation of church and state—needs continual reaffirmation and recommitment in our country today.

Church to serve society

As stated in the [1963 Baptist Faith and Message](#), the church is to be the servant of society, not seeking influence through government coercion, but through sacrificial love of community:

“The Christian should oppose in the spirit of Christ every form of greed, selfishness, and vice. He should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the aged, the helpless, and the sick,” doing so while “always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth.”

Every day presents new opportunities for Christians to maintain a faithful witness in the public square—one that doesn’t seek power over others, but service of the community.

Our contribution in living within the “if” of Franklin’s quote should strengthen the church, the state and our neighbor as we humbly live out our faith and serve others.

As Jesus said: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

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and Social Sciences. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.

CORRECTION: "Democracy" at the end of the quote in the first paragraph was corrected to "monarchy."