

Politics & The Church

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Over the years I've been in ministry, one of the greatest challenges I've faced is understanding how to best engage the church in the world of politics that surrounds us. I've had people ask me to get Celebration involved in any number of protests for a range of political causes. I've been asked many times to allow candidates for office speak from our platform. Let me tell you, navigating those moments has been a challenge. Politics can be very divisive and many people believe the church should have nothing to do with anything political.

Maybe that's how you feel. The very idea that your church could engage in anything political makes you uncomfortable. A few years ago, I invited a congressman to join me on the platform for an interview. This whole thing was happening at my request. We worked with his office for weeks to get him here on the date we needed. One of our staff members even called the congressman's mom to ask her to encourage her son to join us! He was a solid Christ Follower, a legitimate expert on the subject we were to discuss, it wasn't an election year. Who could possibly object to him joining us. Yet as soon as I introduced him, a small group of people got up and walked out. For them, anything that might even be considered political had no place in the church. It makes you wonder, is there a right way for the church to be involved in politics?

Biblically the answer is yes. So let's explore this more carefully today. How can the church rightly engage in politics?

The most important political action of any church is to **BE THE CHURCH**.

How is being the church in any way political? Well let's quickly define what we mean by politics. Here's the simplest definition I could put together: **Politics is the activity of deciding what happens between us.**

Now there are different ways this can be done. Around the world, political parties are formed that put forth an agenda for a country. In some countries there's one political party, in other countries there are many. Here in the US, we've got two primary parties and as we head toward an election, these political parties are painting very different pictures of what should happen between us.

In a few weeks, the season of hearing from these parties will end. We'll have heard their arguments and their competing viewpoints, and it will be time to go to the polls and vote.

When we vote, we'll elect leaders who will then bring the ideas of their party into government and seek to craft them into laws so they can enforce the views and vision of their party.

They'll enforce a particular value structure on the citizens of our country and if necessary, they'll use physical force to bring about compliance. Last week we looked at **Romans 13:4 For government is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For government is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.**

The Bible says the state ensures compliance to its will through the sword, in other words, through the force of law. You may not like the laws. You may not get your way in the election, but the state is still going to achieve its aims by enforcing the laws that started out as a part of the platform of the political party it represents. Here in America, it's important to vote not only for the candidate but also for the party they represent because the platform of the party will have tremendous influence over the way our country is led for years to come.

So this is one way that we can decide what happens between us. It's one type of political activity. It's the one that we think of first and foremost when we think of politics.

But the state isn't the only political organization around. There is another organization that has the mandate of deciding what will happen between us. This organization has a very different worldview and understanding of how we should live our lives together. This organization is the church. We don't think of the church as a political organization, but if we define politics as the activity of deciding what will happen between us, it absolutely is.

Think back to the days of the Old Testament. The peoples of the earth are scattered. Attempts to unify themselves had failed. The situation seems hopeless. Reading from Genesis 3 to Genesis 11 is just hard work. Humanity is in real trouble.

In this moment of global desperation, God calls Abraham to follow him. **Genesis 12:1–3 ¹ The Lord said to Abram: Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, I will curse those who treat you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.**

God promises to raise up a new nation that will be a blessing to everyone on earth. The Bible goes on to tell us that this nation was to be a kingdom of priests, an example of how a society could come together around the laws of God and live rightly. The law of God will be the foundation of their politics, of their deciding what will happen between them.

But Israel didn't follow through. They find themselves falling in to the same pattern as everyone around them. Their government is corrupt and wickedness is everywhere. God ultimately gets fed up with them and sends them in to exile. But as God does so, he extends a promise of a new covenant, a new hope with a new people.

Jeremiah 31:31–34 ³¹ “Look, the days are coming”—this is the Lord’s declaration—“when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² This one will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant they broke even though I had married them” —the Lord’s declaration. ³³ “Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days”—the Lord’s declaration. “I will put My teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. ³⁴ No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest of them” —this is the Lord’s declaration. “For I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sin.”

One day there will be this new community. It’s going to be different than anything else on the earth. This new community will be led by the right ruler - by God himself. He will determine what will happen between the members of this community. He will put his law on their hearts. Fast forward to the NT. Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit. The very Spirit of God will live inside of those who are a part of Jesus’ church. The Spirit of God will go to work and will draw us toward the things of God from the inside out. The Spirit will bring about fruit in the lives of the believer that are markedly different than the things of the flesh.

In this community, there is true equality: everyone knows the ruler and is in a relationship with him. It doesn’t matter where you are from. It doesn’t matter what color you are. It doesn’t matter how much money or education or status you have. Each member of this new community will have been inducted the same way. They will all come in by grace. God says, *I will forgive their sin and remember it no more. You come in through the grace and mercy of Christ who offers to forgive you of your sin, make you right with the father and adopt you in to this family, the eternal church. In this community, you give up our right to rule over one another.* In this community, you love regardless of race, nation, party or language because our leader commands it. His command is written on our heart.

And because of what we find through God’s grace in this new community, we’re constantly inviting people from every background, regardless of how in bondage to sin they may be to join into this kingdom.

1 Peter 2:9–10 ⁹ But you are **a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, so that you may proclaim the praises** of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So the church establishes a totally different community here on earth. And as we do so, we become an embassy of the kingdom of God here on earth. It’s a little slice of heaven on foreign soil.

Years ago, my family lived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. We loved our life there. We made incredible friends and we witnessed God do some amazing things there. But though we loved it, we were reminded that we were in a foreign country every single day.

It was nothing to be driving down the streets of the capitol and find yourself surrounded by a flock of sheep or a herd of donkeys! You'd be looking around you, stuck in this very different kind of traffic and thinking, *This doesn't happen to me back home!*

So in those days, we would go the American Embassy and wander the grounds. There was a little restaurant where we could eat hamburgers and French fries! There was a small library we could check out books or rent movies. The housing on the embassy was set up like an American neighborhood. Typical American style houses with half-acre of lawns. There were no walls separating them like there are all around most houses in Africa.

One year we went to the embassy to take our kids Trick or Treating on Halloween. We wandered through the neighborhood on the embassy grounds. All the embassy families sat on their front porch handing out candy. It was like being back in America! For just a few minutes it wasn't like being in a foreign country anymore. It felt like home.

That's the church. The church is like an embassy of the kingdom of God here on earth. It's refreshing to be a part of because in this body, the rules and ways of our Heavenly Kingdom reign supreme.

But being a part of an embassy is about more than just creating a little bit of home in a foreign land. An embassy exists to represent it's home government in this different place. And that's the job of the church. We represent the kingdom of God among the kingdoms of this earth. And to the degree that we represent rightly the lordship of our king, we gain in credibility in this world.

We see this beautifully exemplified in the early church. Acts 2 tells us about it: **Acts 2:45–47** ⁴⁵ **They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need.** ⁴⁶ **Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude,** ⁴⁷ **praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.**

Do you see in this snapshot of the early church how the church effectively worked as an embassy for the kingdom of God here on earth? And in this snapshot, we see that the church can achieve things earthly government cannot. The church is where the hope of goodness that the state might strive for is actually realized. The state hopes to find equality. It **MUST EXIST** in the church. The state hopes to find peace. Peace **MUST EXIST** in the church. The state hopes to provide a safety net for its citizens. The safety net **MUST EXIST** in the church.

Because here in the church we are to take on the mind of Christ and show genuine love and caring for one another because of the Gospel. The church should be the most healthy, high functioning political organization on the planet.

So on one hand, you have the political community established by the state. It takes the rule of the party that brings it to power and it codifies the desires of the party into law and then it enforces those laws through the power of the sword. The Bible says we need the state. It's a tool of God used to advance good and restrain evil.

But as important as the state is, as necessary as it is, the state can't change the human heart. Only the Gospel can do that. The state has the sword, but the church has the Gospel.

So the most important thing that the church can do politically is be the church. The local church should be the ideal and model political society. And you and I have the responsibility of creating that here at Celebration. It's our job to make this an embassy here in Tallahassee.

So we encourage one another and we love one another and we care for one another in real and tangible ways and every time someone sees the love we have for one another, we're showing them the embassy for the Kingdom of God.

Now, when the church is effectively like an embassy of the Kingdom of God in a foreign land, the church gains credibility. It becomes believable. It has the legitimacy to have influence in earthly government. Without credibility we've got nothing.

When I was a kid, my family went to Gatlinburg, TN over Christmas break. It was really cold that year and there was snow on the ground. I got it in my head that I wanted to go snow skiing. I'd never skied before. The closest I'd ever gotten was sledding on the hills near my house. I loved that so I figured I'd enjoy skiing. My mom went along and we went up to the ski lodge there in Gatlinburg.

Now as far as I remember, there wasn't a plan beyond this point. We went into the pro shop and asked about renting skis. My mom and I are standing there looking at all this gear, trying to figure out what we needed. We were clueless! About that time a man comes up to us. He was older and had a heavy foreign accent. He asked if I had ever skied before. I told him no and he asked, *Would you like to learn?* I said, *Absolutely!* The man looked at my mom and asked if it was OK. He told her there would be no charge, he just wanted to encourage me.

Mom looked a little suspicious. She was probably thinking, *Who is this guy?* But the pro shop manager speaks up and says, *It's OK. Your son is in very good hands.*

So mom goes along and the man helped me pick out my gear and walked me outside. He showed me how to put everything on and then started teaching me how to use it all. Mom is still in the pro shop watching like a hawk! Some strange man with a foreign accent is out there with her son! But the pro shop manager comes back over to my mom. He said, *Do you have any*

idea who that is with your son? He's one of the best ski instructors in the country. He's here visiting and he just happened to be in the shop when you walked in. For some reason, he decided he wanted to give your son a ski lesson! The lesson he's giving your son right now would be worth a couple hundred bucks!

Suddenly my mom was feeling pretty good! Soon this man walked me over to the lift for the bunny slope, helped me on and off the lift and then skied with me all the way to the bottom. It was a flawless run! I skied down that bunny slope a few more times that day on my own. I went from a wannabe to a skier in one day!

As for my mom, she couldn't have been more thrilled. Why? Because I'd been shown how to ski by a nationally regarded ski instructor. He knew what he was doing. He had credibility.

If the pro shop manager hadn't told her who the man was and how qualified he was to give me a lesson, do you think she would have let him take me to the top of a mountain and push me off the edge? No chance! She trusted his experience and expertise. She trusted his credibility.

If the church is being the church, then it gains credibility in the world. We gain influence and we can then use that influence to encourage earthly government to do what is good.

So as you're being a part of the church, as you're being a part of building it into an embassy for the Kingdom, you've got credibility to seek to influence our earthly government.

We leverage that credibility to collectively lift our voice in influence in a couple of strategic ways:

First, We Use Our Voice for Good.

Last week, we learned that doing good and promoting good among its citizens is one of the key reasons that God established government in the first place.

The church encourages the state to do good when it works toward a greater love, justice and compassion in our world increasing its credibility and influence as it uses its voice to encourage government to do likewise.

Jesus is talking with his followers about our need to bear influence in our world not only by what we say, but also by what we do. **Matthew 5:13–16** ¹³ "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled on by men. ¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Here Jesus commands his followers to demonstrate goodness as defined by God. We are to love our neighbor in a way that our neighbor can see it and understand it. We're to work for

justice for those who are disadvantaged. We're to use our capacities our skills and our interests to do good. When getting involved in hands on, practical ways beyond the church family is combined with the church being the church for one another, our credibility skyrockets and we earn the right to be heard in the public square.

My wife has taught me a lot here. For as long as I've known her, she's had a calling to serve children. She has expressed that calling consistently throughout her lifetime, by investing in the lives of children on two continents. After teaching for years here in Tallahassee, Pam became guardian ad litem. That experience motivated her to focus on kids with acute family needs. She became a foster care coordinator, serving kids who are in real crisis. This has given her a platform to encourage others to care about this important topic. She helps them get trained to foster. She supports them through it. She has the tough conversations with them about when it may be time to step away. Through it all, Pam is now an advocate for children. People seek her out to take advantage of her expertise. She uses her voice to call others to serve children and her voice has credibility.

We've got so many people in our church that are getting this done. We've got people in our church who are outspoken in the fight against abortion. They work at the women's pregnancy center, showing the love of Christ to women and men who are at an incredibly vulnerable moment in their lives. They encourage them to do what is right. They speak up on legal issues regarding abortion. They speak for life in a very winsome way and because they work so diligently for the welfare of those they serve, they have credibility.

All around our city, members of Celebration serve in the community gaining credibility and that credibility gives you a qualified, compassionate voice to speak.

Many of you have the kinds of experiences that make you a real expert in a given field. God has given you those experiences to establish your credibility. You have a voice to call on government to be heard. Seek out opportunities within the state agencies that regulate fields of your expertise. Find groups that advocate for issues important to you. Then lend your credibility and your voice to call for good to be done. Everyone here should take on the responsibility of using their voice for good.

Second, We Use Our Voice for Change.

You probably know that our government doesn't always get it right. It's true at the local, state and national level. Sometimes these shortcomings are simply policy failures. An idea was tried, but it has failed and it's time to move on. Sometimes policy was flawed from the beginning. It didn't do what was good for people nor did it lead people to do good themselves. Still other times, a leader or group of leaders falls in to temptation. They become corrupt, self-centered or overbearing.

When these situations arise, the church owes it to our leaders to confront them with the hard facts. Throughout history, God has worked through his people to hold governments

accountable. Men and women of faith have taken on this challenge and assumed tremendous risk in the process.

Last week we looked at the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three young men who were exiles in Babylon who found themselves in the hall of power. These three men stood courageously before the king and declared that their first allegiance was to God, not him. These three men had a friend named Daniel. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Daniel also rose in power within Babylon. Daniel's integrity and his commitment to God gave him tremendous credibility as a leader inside a pagan government. The government around him was far from godly. The king struggled with his own ego and held the lives of others as something to be expended for his own gain.

One night the king has a dream and he calls on Daniel to interpret it for him. Daniel uses this opportunity to confront the king about his standing before God. **Daniel 4:27-28** Therefore, may my advice seem good to you my king. Separate yourself from your sins by doing what is right, and from your injustices by showing mercy to the needy. Perhaps there will be an extension of your prosperity."

How could Daniel say something like that to a king who had life and death authority over him? How could he possibly think the king would listen? Daniel had credibility and he boldly used his voice to bring about change.

Come to the New Testament and look at Paul, the apostle, theologian and church planter. In the book of Acts we learn that Paul was arrested after a riot breaks out at the temple in Jerusalem. Paul is taken before Marcus Antonius Felix, the Roman governor of Judea. Felix had a reputation for brutality. It was rumored that he had the High Priest assassinated. He was so ruthless that he was ultimately recalled to Rome by an Emperor named Nero. If you were too ruthless for Nero, you're just too ruthless!

Anyway, Paul stands before Felix, this ruthless guy, and this is what they talked about: **Acts 24:24-25** 24 After some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and listened to him on the subject of faith in Christ Jesus. 25 Now as he spoke about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix became afraid and replied, "Leave for now, but when I find time I'll call for you."

Look carefully at this pattern. Paul had lived boldly for Christ. He'd spoken all over the Roman Empire about his faith. He'd planted churches that functioned like embassies among the kingdom of this world. He had maximum credibility, so much so that a ruthless governor who was far from God called him in for an audience.

Paul seizes the opportunity and he stands before Felix and calls on him to make a change. He calls on him to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ. He calls on him to abandon his sinfulness. He calls on him to demonstrate self-control. And he warns him that judgment is coming for him if

he doesn't embrace the gospel. That is bold! Felix, a tyrannical and blood thirsty leader, was overwhelmed with fear.

How could Paul do this? Felix clearly had the power to take his life! It's simple. Paul had earned credibility because he'd been a part of leading the church to really be the church. Through the power of the Spirit of God, he boldly leveraged that credibility and became a disruptive influence for good, confronting a tyrant to change.

Years ago I was talking with a missionary friend told me a story about something that had happened not too long before in the country where he served. Like so many African countries at the time, the country had a strongman for a president. He began his rule as a good man, but over time, his thirst for power had changed him. He began to rule as a dictator and his people were suffering.

My friend told me of a young woman who had arrived a couple of years prior as a missionary. Like so many missionaries, she was a great lady who loved the lord. She served in her new country with tremendous compassion and credibility and had quickly earned a good reputation. One day as this young woman was praying, she became convinced she was to go and confront this dictatorial president.

Obviously, she shook it off! She assumed it was something she'd had for dinner the night before, not the leading of the Spirit of God! But she kept on getting that prompting from the Spirit of God.

Finally, she couldn't take it any longer. She picked up the phone and called the office of the president of the country. She figured her call wouldn't even be answered. But it was. She asked for an appointment with the president. She was confident she'd be turned away. But instead, an appointment was given, just a few days away!

The woman found the courage to keep the appointment. She walked into the office of the president of the country, shook his hand and sat down for some small talk. After a few minutes, she lost her nerve. She thanked the president for his time and stood to leave. As she walked to the door, the president called her name. He looked at her and said, *This isn't why you came here today. Why did you come?*

Well this was it! She had no choice. She looked at the president and said, *God has sent me here to tell you that he sees your sin and he is calling on you to repent. You claim to be a Christian, but you are leading like a tyrant and you must change.* The president looked at this young woman and said, *You're absolutely right.* Soon the president released all political prisoners and called for free and fair elections which ultimately brought his days of leadership to a close.

What happened? A young woman who was a part of the church of Jesus Christ spoke with great credibility and through the Holy Spirit of God, she used her voice for change.

This is what the church must do. It must use its voice to call for change in such a way that good happens.

The state has the sword, the force of law. We encourage the state to use that force to achieve good. We don't expect the state to be the church. We don't expect the state to accomplish the aims of the church. We understand the limits of the state.

But! We the church must use our voice to bring about good and to bring about change. Along the way we maintain our credibility by being the church, the embassy of the kingdom of God among the kingdoms of this world, so that we maintain our voice and earn the right to be heard.

So as Christ followers, we are called to form this healthy political community known as the church of Jesus Christ. This community is to be so radically different that it looks like an embassy of the kingdom of God among the kingdoms of the earth.

God is calling us to use our voice for good and to bring about change with maximum credibility. When we do, we can influence our government to do good, restrain evil and promote good among its citizens.

And the question I have for you is simply this: Are you a part of this community? Are you a part of the church of Jesus Christ, this embassy of the Kingdom of God? The entrance requirements are the same for everyone. It doesn't matter your history, your race, your language, your wealth, your education. Everyone is welcome.

To join in, you need only admit your sinfulness when compared to a holy and perfect God. You need only accept that Christ has come, lived a perfect life and then offered himself as a sacrifice to pay the penalty of your sin.

This same Jesus wants to live in you through the power of the Spirit of God so that you can be in community with him not only now but forever. He is inviting you to say, *Yes, I want to join you, I want to be forgiven and made right with you. I want to be in your family now and forever.*

I am asking you to make that decision today. Reach out to us through our website. Go to the fresh start link and learn what it means to be in a relationship with Christ and become a citizen of Christ's Kingdom. Then join in with the local church. Help build it into a healthy, high functioning body that consistently shows the love of Christ and earns the credibility to be heard. Together, we can speak for good and speak for change.

Let's pray and thank God for his invitation to join him. PRAY