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The Pitfalls and Possibilities of Being “Political”

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

There is no category called “politics” that can be safely quarantined from the category we call “religion.”

In this episode, Kevin reads from the second of a series of articles for WORLD Opinions on how to think about Christianity and politics.

Transcript

Greetings and Salutations! Yes, this is Life and Books and Everything and I'm Kevin D. Young here to read my latest world article. I keep saying I'll see you at the end of the summer but then I forget that I still am writing some of these world opinions pieces. So, I'm going to read some of these words.

So, here's the latest one. The Pitfalls and Possibilities of Being Political. Where should Christians draw the line? This is part two of a multi-part series that will address six questions related to Christianity and politics.

In part one, I ask why is it so hard to talk about politics? Today, and look at the second question, are Christians too focused on politics? It's already been 15 years since David Kenneman and Gabe Lyons published their widely cited book, "UnChristian, What a New Generation Really Think about Christianity and Why It Matters." Based on research from the Barna Group, the point of the book was clear from the first sentence. Christianity has an image problem. Though the research was hailed as "groundbreaking" and "surprising," I doubt many people were shocked to learn that 16 to 29 year olds held negative stereotypes in the past.

And negative stereotypes about the church. Among those negative impressions were that the church was hypocritical, judgmental, anti-homosexual, and too political. Set aside whether Barna's research told the whole story, a few years later, sociologist Bradley R. E. Wright published a book link response titled, "Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrits," and "Other Lies You've Been Told," a sociologist shatters myths from the

secular and Christian media.

Let's also set aside whether Christianity can or should try to manage its image in a hostile world. Let's just focus on one of the most prominent knocks on the church, that Christians are too political. On the one hand, criticism is not without merit.

Undoubtedly, some Christians and churches are too political insofar as they eat and drink and sleep, electoral politics. Wherever politics becomes ultimate instead of subordinate, whenever it becomes the animating energy in a congregation, or whenever it becomes the actual glue that holds the church together, we are too focused on politics. As a Presbyterian, I affirm the spirituality of the church.

Although the doctrine was used in the south to excuse slavery, the doctrine came out of Scotland centuries earlier and had nothing to do with slavery. At its best, the spirituality of the church reminds us that the church's mission is "soteriological." Its power is limited, and its expertise does not stretch into every area of human life. If a pastor is better known for his views on COVID-19, or for his analysis of the latest shooting, then he is far from what he should be. If a pastor is better known for his views on the Trinity, the person of Christ in the gospel, then something is wrong.

And yet, that's not all we need to say about being political. For starters, the calling of the church is not identical to the calling of individual Christians. Surely we need more serious, theologically minded Christians involved in politics, not fewer.

And by politics, I don't necessarily mean "online punditry." Commenting on the 24-hour news cycle can be honorable work, and I'm glad we have some thoughtful Christians engaged in that effort. But we should not think that is the only way to "do something" or "get involved." As a general rule, we could use less political punditry and more moral philosophy. We need Christian thinkers to take us back to first principles.

We need theologians to apply the Bible and the best of the Christian tradition in today's "seemingly" or rather "two" today's "seemingly intractable problems." We also should be honest that the charge of being "too political" is often code for "I don't like your politics." Most people are happy to have Christians passionately involved and vociferously commenting on the issues they care about. It's when Christians come down on the other side of the political divide that we hear cries to "stay out of politics" or "stick to the gospel." We would do better to object to the position itself if the disagreement is with the actual politics, rather than with being "too political." To this end, it would help to distinguish between explicitly biblical positions, for example abortion as murder, partiality as a sin, and the policies that people draw from those positions. God wants us to care for widows and orphans as in the Bible.

God demands that this specific government-sponsored entitlement program is not. Ultimately, even if we wanted to, we could not wash our hands of politics altogether. Yes, I would love to see Christians pontificating much less about complex matters they don't

understand.

Yes, I would welcome a sharp decrease in the number of Christians being wishy, washy about the faith once delivered for the saints, while they are dogmatic about prudential matters that do not allow for easy answers. But even if we did all that, and we should, we would not be free from politics. There is no category called "politics" that can be safely quarantined from the category we call "religion." Most of the seminal thinkers in the Western political tradition of the last 500 years looked for the truth about politics, as they did in the broader category of moral philosophy, in the Bible, and in natural law.

And so far as politics touches on human government, human nature, human flourishing, ethics, law, rights, duties, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Christianity will be, in the ultimate sense, inescapably political. So much of our politics is obsessed with small and petty things.

On these matters, Christians should refuse to get sucked into the vortex of spite, stupidity, and manufactured outrage. And when it comes to the right ordering of our society, the right application of biblical anthropology, and the right insistence on what leads to human freedom and human flourishing, the well-taught and well-formed Christian must not be silent.

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