



Pastors and Politics, Part 1: Courage and Wisdom

This two-part series encourages local church pastors with wise discipleship and effective engagement on issues of political concern. In this first essay, the focus is on the boundaries of wise communication. The second essay looks at some of the hidden issues and groups overlooked in our polarized era. The author has been a pastor and public intellectual for over thirty years, speaking at business, educational centers, public forums and in churches.

Dr. Jim Baucom, senior pastor of Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, VA (in the heart of Metro Washington, D.C.), shared about his growing and vibrant community: “People speak of America divided between Blue and Red, Democrat and Republican. Well, our church is very Purple! We have women and men worshiping and serving together that differ deeply on some policies and principles but agree that Christ unites us in our faith and service.”

Pastor A.J. Swoboda leads Theophilus Church: “We are a church in SE Portland. We are here to help people Find Jesus, Build Community and Pursue Justice.” A.J. is a leading voice in ecological theology and helps churches, seminaries and businesses steward the environment as part of worshiping and serving the Lord. He recently published an important book, *The Subversive Sabbath*, calling believers to recover the divine principle of rest as part of a healthy life in Christ. One of his happiest moments as a pastor came during the 2016 election. Two members of his church are local political leaders from each party. One Sunday just before the November election they served communion together.

These stories of communities finding a deeper unity in Christ and welcoming women and men from diverse persuasions are heartening and offer insights for pastors in our angry, polarized American public square. How do pastors unite compassion and conviction and wisely disciple women and men for participation in public life?

The fear of “being political” keeps many pastors from addressing critical issues. Pastors are rightly concerned about ideology and partisanship eclipsing gospel focus. At the same time, addressing vital moral and social issues is an essential part of effective discipleship and mission. What are some boundaries and insights needed in navigating these rapids?

Three Insights

There are three initial thoughts which help displace fear with courage and reactions with wisdom. The first principle is **respecting clear boundaries of biblical truth and civil law**. The Bible clearly leads Christians toward good citizenship, prayerful concern for authority and reasonable adherence to the laws in place (Romans 13; I Timothy 2). At the same time, obeying divine mandates above the civil ones and understanding that kingdom citizenship takes priority

over current power structures is vital (Matthew 5; Acts 5; Hebrews 11). According to current American law (The 1954 Johnson Amendment to the IRS tax code), churches and other nonprofit organizations that are exempt from taxation, "are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office." So, there are only two restrictions on political discourse that threaten the religious, non-profit status of a local church. The first is endorsement of a specific political candidate. The second is endorsement of one political party over another. In other words, blatant partisanship.

Pastors and churches CAN

- Speak on any political issues
- Lead voter registration drives (non-partisan)
- Host events inviting all candidates

The issue for most is not the letter of IRS regulation but the fear of alienating members and seekers. This leads us to the second insight: **Pastors must choose their issues wisely and frame their arguments biblically.** The late theologian Donald Bloesch once said that, "Ideology is the enemy of theology." Pastors must help congregants discover biblical conviction and discernment on particular policies, not just a particular party's talking points. In many cases, biblically wise framing will help believers engender new ways of seeing (and even solving) contentious issues. Jesus said we are blessed when we are persecuted for obedience in the kingdom, not obnoxious political agitation.

For example, being biblically pro-life is more than being against abortion. Concern for all people from conception to coronation – especially the broken, poor and vulnerable – is foundational for biblical obedience. Respect for those in the military must be joined with a passion for peacemaking, a hallmark of wise Christian leadership. Libertarian and socialist answers for poverty alleviation fall short compared to a Christian vision for human flourishing that includes spiritual, relational, social and economic help and private/public integration of resources (See Corbett and Fikkert's seminal work here: *When Helping Hurts*, a recommended MTF resource).

Boundaries and wise discernment of the deeper issues must be integrated with the third attribute of wise leadership: courage. Courage is the virtue that avoids the extremes of fear and foolishness. In Joshua 1, the Lord tells the new leader of Israel four times to be "strong and courageous." In Ephesians 6, Paul asks his readers to pray for boldness in proclamation, even under persecution. Some issues are morally clear, and it is the pastor's task to unveil the rich biblical insights underneath stated convictions. Some issues require more discernment and here humility joins courage as leaders declare their understanding.



Pastors, speaking courageously is needed. When undergirded by deep prayer and tears for our beautiful and broken world, such speech cannot be confused with the agitation propaganda and polarizing insults permeating our public discourse.

History and hope can frame our communication. It took courage for pastors to speak against slavery and it takes courage to foster racial reconciliation. It took courage for pastors and missionaries to oppose rapacious colonialism and it takes courage to promote justice for all. It took courage for pastors to help bring justice to the workplace, reducing child labor, and encouraging fair conditions and wages. It takes courage for pastors to take on entrenched powers in cities and states keeping many from thriving. And it takes courage for pastors to avoid ideological captivity and empower their congregants for leadership in all spheres of society.

Wise boundaries, Biblical foundations for discernment and courage will help pastors shepherd wisely.

Pastors and Politics, Part 2: Hidden Issues of Love and Justice

Our divided American political world offers peacemaking opportunities for local churches. As leaders and congregations committed to Biblical authority and the timeless moral and spiritual convictions of historic Christianity, we will never please everyone or always win over our opponents. This is why compassionate, intercession-infused courage and wisdom are vital for leading God's people in to maturity and kingdom influence.

The obvious "hot-button" economic, moral and social issues must be confronted: divisions of class, gender and race, abortion and infanticide, marriage and sexual ethics, peace and war and many more. These require deep study, discernment and humility.

There are, however, hidden issues of love and justice that the local church is uniquely equipped to address. Convening partners and confronting particular barriers to flourishing will enhance peace among diverse groups and offer a shining witness of Christ in a world darkened by moral inversion and spiritual confusion.

One day in Nashville, TN, a group of pastors met to learn more about connecting Sunday faith and Monday work and infusing integration into their worship service, discipleship plans and outreach efforts. In the midst of a lively conversation of church and community flourishing, an African American pastor stood up and spoke, his voice trembling and full of pathos: "I am not an angry man. I have been a pastor in my church and neighborhood for over thirty years. Your church [here he pointed to a young church-planting leader] just set up your franchise two



blocks away. No one called me. No one thought to talk to the people of the neighborhood. What you call gentrification and opportunity we call exile. Aren't we supposed to work together? Where will my people go when they can't afford to live in their neighborhood?"

There was a holy silence. The church planter humbly apologized and with tears, both leaders agreed to work together. **The hidden issue? Gentrification. What some see as a positive transformation of blight is often displacement of generations of residents.** What can the local church do?

Pastors and church have unique convening ability. Creating space for shared vision, dialogue and forging alliances among business, cultural, educational, social service, religious, and political leaders for the common good is a prophetic opportunity. Asking the question, "What does a flourishing neighborhood look like...and how can everyone be a part of the future?" and hosting people with the influence, skills and wisdom to forge a just answer is part of our calling as a church. One of the great critics of the early church in the 2nd and 3rd century was a man named Celsus. He was particularly indignant that the communion table welcomed all classes, cultures, races and both genders. Pastors can bring wise believers and people of conscience in all domains so that a community can improve without scattering generations of residents.

The second hidden issue is deeply connected to the first: **How can we help foster true equity and create opportunities for sustainable work so that all classes and cultures flourish** in a rapidly-changing world? Put another way, how do we empower folks that are left behind in the name of "progress" or the "gig economy"?

The local church, in cooperation with other churches and agencies, can shine brightly as she empowers congregants and the community with the spiritual, emotional, relational, vocational and occupational support and wisdom people need. Immediate emergency aid is good, but long-term, relational investment in people will yield much better results. The 21st century global economy demand workers with clarity and stability in their vocations and great flexibility and nimbleness in their daily occupations. Pastors can help create disciples able to understand and respond to the local and global changes. Local churches can convene forums for community growth that is inclusive and just.

One growing local church recently sold some property. Instead of either building a bigger church building or sitting on the funds, the congregation fostered ten new initiatives that help the community flourish, including new business incubation, life skills training and compassionate outreach programs offering hope for many.

Jeff Greer, senior pastor of Grace Chapel in Mason, OH (in the Cincinnati metro area) has articulated a vision he calls, "Biznistry." The local church can be an incubator of economic,



social, and spiritual transformation as she empowers and equips men and women in creating sustainable enterprises that in turn contribute resources for future entrepreneurs.

The third hidden arena of love and justice concerns the unseen populations often overlooked in our conversations on flourishing. These include ex-prisoners and their families, and people with disabilities. Our neighborhoods and our nation are missing out on these divine image bearers that have much to offer as opportunities for meaningful work and service are made available.

People coming out of incarceration need the social capital of the local church so that they can grow in self-worth, learn needed skills and find open doors for sustainable work. Women and men with disabilities can be productive workers, not just objects of charity. These hidden groups can be participants in the more than 600 churches with some form of “job club.” Helping people find sustainable work in a rapidly changing economy is integral to the local church’s mission.

Whether it is the Career Actions Ministry of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church (now helping older people find and keep work in a “gig economy” that favors the young), Jeff Greer’s Biznistry for entrepreneurs or the efforts of restaurateur Tom Landis in Texas who employs men and women with autism and Down Syndrome, local churches can foster a creative and innovative vision offering hope and wisdom.

Navigating political issues will never be easy. Pastors need love, courage and wisdom as they equip God’s people for engagement – not just in voting – but in being part of the solution. Pastors can also help church and community look past the obvious issues and create fresh pathways forward so all can thrive, without capitulating to ideological extremes and the paralysis of partisan politics.