

## Since God Has Thus Ordain'd It So

*Church Hymn Book, German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Tennessee, 1816*

Since God has thus ordain'd it so,  
That civil magistrates should be  
To rule and govern men below,  
As in his sacred word we see:

Since such like office I do bear  
To execute those civil laws,  
May I be wise, just and sincere  
To judge aright in ev'ry cause.

The Lord, grant me an upright heart,  
And with his blessed Spirit guide:  
To act the just impartial part,  
In all whate'er I must decide.

From none but thee my God indeed,  
Such precious gifts I can obtain,  
Nor gain the knowledge that I need  
To judge between my fellow-men.

For this I pray and humbly ask  
My God endow me with thy grace!  
And qualify me for the task,  
To do my office in my place.

## ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### Preaching Politics

*Kevin T. Bauder*

Some people think that politics should be left out of the pulpit. One small, Midwestern denomination articulates as one of its “fundamental principles” that partisan political preaching is “discouraged.” The sentiment is echoed in many Christian groups, even if they do not state it formally.

This aversion to political preaching grows from two sources. First, theologically, some Christians emphasize the spirituality of the church. According to this teaching, the church has an essentially moral and spiritual mission, not a political one. Second, practically, some Christians fear that an emphasis on politics will divide congregations unnecessarily. They seem to think that adherents to any political party ought to feel equally comfortable in every church.

I agree with the doctrine of the church's spirituality. This doctrine, however, is limited in important ways. The first limitation is that a part of the church's spiritual mission is to prepare individual believers to function in a fully Christian way in their various callings. What does that mean?

A calling is a position in which God places an individual. A Christian may be a husband or a wife, a father or a mother, a butcher or a builder, or any of a host of other callings. But a Christian is never *just* those things. Every Christian's most fundamental calling is to be an ambassador of Christ. Christians must use their various callings as ways of advancing their one, chief calling.

One of our callings is to be citizens of the countries where we live. Different nations and civilizations expect different levels of participation from their citizens or subjects, so the Bible articulates few hard-and-fast rules about citizenship. We must apply biblical principles to understand how to fulfill our calling as ambassadors of Christ within the individual social context of the governments under which we live.

The United States is a representative democracy or a republic. In the United States, our calling as citizens includes a voice in the selection of leadership. This voice is normally expressed through campaigning and voting, though sometimes a deliberate non-vote can become a form of participation.



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Part of the mission of the church is to instruct its saints so that they rightly fulfill their ultimate calling within their national calling. Therefore, while the church might not tell people which candidates to vote for, it has a duty to prepare them to vote in a Christian way. Part of that preparation will include preaching.

The second limitation on the spirituality of the church is that we cannot draw a sharp line between moral or spiritual issues and political issues. There is no watertight barrier between these categories. As a matter of fact, we often discover that political issues are moral and spiritual at their root. We also find that moral and spiritual issues regularly manage to find their way into politics.

Not every political issue is moral or spiritual. Probably most are not. The Bible does not provide obvious answers to certain questions. To cite an example that is now obsolete, the Bible does not provide guidance on the question of whether a government should back its currency with the gold standard or whether it should also back its currency with silver. At the same time, the Bible does teach that governments can rightly issue currency. Questions that have no clear biblical or theological answer should not be taken as moral or spiritual questions. Where the Bible provides no genuine guidance, pastors should remain silent in the pulpit.

We can summarize the principle briefly: when a political question is also a moral and spiritual question, then pastors have a duty to address it. We can put the same principle in different words: when a spiritual and moral question becomes a political question, pastors must address it. It would be ludicrous to suggest that pastors cannot preach biblical morality simply because it becomes controversial in the political sphere. In fact, the time they ought to preach biblical morality most clearly is when it is in danger of becoming politicized.

By fulfilling this obligation, pastors often perform a function similar to that of referees. For example, they ought to blow the whistle when some candidate tries to treat a merely political issue as if it were a moral or spiritual issue. This is precisely what is happening under the labels of *social justice*, *equity*, *diversity*, and *inclusion*. There is a false and anti-biblical philosophy at work in those ideas, and it is one against which shepherds must warn their sheep.

Other times, candidates try to ignore or even contradict moral issues that do not match their political commitments. Here again pastors should blow the whistle. We should be willing to name political policies that contradict biblical morality, and we should encourage our people to back candidates who will reject those policies.

Some candidates will try to seize the high ground on some issues by distorting right moral and spiritual teaching. Pastors have a duty to step in and

help their congregations disentangle distorted moral claims. We should expose unspoken assumptions, false dichotomies, and dishonest reasoning wherever these skew moral understanding.

Not uncommonly, a candidate will try to dismiss concerns by claiming that a particular issue is not a moral one, even though it is. This is another occasion when the pastor's voice should be heard. In fact, we should do more than point out which issues are genuinely moral. We should be training our people in moral thinking so that they can detect bogus claims for themselves.

Sometimes moral evaluation must go beyond policies and issues to personal behaviors. Pastors have a duty to call out candidates whose individual conduct subverts common morality. This task must be performed toward all candidates of all parties and positions. No pastor should be in the position of denouncing iniquity in the opposition while ignoring it among his allies.

A pastor who fulfills these tasks faithfully is going to sound very much like a conservative. There are reasons for that. One is that conservatives believe in a transcendent moral order that we are accountable to know. Another is that people who read the Bible in an originalist way also tend to read their nation's constitution in an originalist way. Consequently, any pastor who faithfully applies true moral and spiritual principles to political questions is much more likely to offend members of the progressive or liberal party than he is the conservative one.

But that is no reason to shrink from the task. We are in the business of making disciples. Christ's disciples are also His ambassadors in the world. They function within their earthly regimes to represent the interests and claims of His kingdom. Let us not shrink from political preaching when morality demands it.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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