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Pastoral Assistance from GLC
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THINKING THEOLOGICALLY: Election Season

For questions or concerns about this resource, to discuss this topic in more detail, recommend books, or to share wisdom from your own pastoral context, please contact Bishop Lynn Thrush (lthrush@bicus.org) or Matthew Peterson at: Matthew R. Peterson, Theologian in Residence (Great Lakes BIC) mpeterson490@ProtonMail.com (631) 871-8339

I. THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT ELECTION SEASON

It will likely come as no surprise that this resource begins by acknowledging that political polarization is at an all-time high in American society. Recent reporting from the Pew Research Center and Public Religion Research Institute suggests that polarization is *the* guiding force in American politics, more so than one's demographic backgrounds, religious tradition, or ethical beliefs.¹ The past few years have also seen a rapid rise of Christian nationalist movements that combine violent political postures, apocalyptic rhetoric, and religious trappings in pursuit of power. Even in situations where a political stance emerges out of sincere Christian conviction, there exists the risk that

one's posture can slip into political tribalism in favor of parties or candidates that hold to the same view. The challenge of such polarization affects us all, but is uniquely complex for those of us who are engaged in ministry. A recent report from The Barna Group² saw 32% of pastors report that their ability to lead their congregation has been negatively impacted by current political divisions. Among those contemplating leaving their ministries, 38% cited political polarization in the pews as a motivating factor.

When so many in our wider society make "lords" out of politics and politicians, and prominent voices (including those in the church) equate discipleship with voting patterns, we must ask ourselves how to combat these tendencies within our congregations. *The core question: how can we encourage our congregation members to keep Jesus as Lord in a world where political affiliation is often at the center of people's self-identities?* First, a qualifier:

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/in-a-politically-polarized-era-sharp-divides-in-both-partisan-coalitions>
<https://www.pri.org/spotlight/the-impact-of-deepening-political-polarization-on-american-democracy>

² <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry>

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This resource is not designed to advocate for a specific set of issues, stances, or candidates. It is not a primer on *how* to vote or *for whom* to vote. It is also not a theological reflection on the democratic process and how (or whether) Jesus-followers ought to engage it. Rather, *this resource is designed to equip your church to work through the complexities and conflicts that arise as a result of our society's political polarization.* In other words, our goal is to find some theological ways of thinking about our current political climate and how to respond to it from a theologically reflective Brethren in Christ perspective for the betterment of our congregational unity.

II. THE PROBLEM OF PARTISANS

The rapid spread of political polarization in the United States over the past decade might prompt us to think that this is a recent phenomenon, the result of politically aligned cable news networks and social media echo chambers. Yet although such divisions are (rightfully) shocking, they can be found throughout history. “Us vs. Them” worldviews that teach people to view themselves and their neighbors through a conflict lens have been a frequent tool of those would seek to divide for the sake of personal gain.

As a scriptural parallel for our present situation we can look at what befell the first century churches in Corinth, where factionalism took root in their communities. Reading Paul’s letters helps us reconstruct a situation in which the Christian community in Corinth was divided along lines of social status and preferred leaders. Paul responded to this division throughout 1 Corinthians, including this early appeal: *“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose”* (1 Cor. 1:10).

We should note that this appeal is actually the *sixth* time that the phrase “Lord Jesus Christ” (or close equivalent) has appeared in the letter’s first ten verses (see: 1 Cor. 1:2-3, 7-9). Paul’s repeated use of this phrase is not without reason. For the sort of division that we see on display in Corinth involved some members clinging to various leaders in order to establish their identity *in contrast* to others. To identify as “of Paul” was at the same time to identify as *not* “of Apollos” and whatever beliefs, practices, or postures (real or not) were seen as a part of that alignment. The problem was that divisions along these arbitrary affiliations risked destroying the unity that could be found in their shared connection with *the Lord Jesus Christ*.

Now I think it would be too simplistic to suggest that Paul made no room whatsoever for disagreement within the churches. The apostle’s own life witnessed to substantial disagreements with others within the earliest Christian communities, only some of which led to disfellowship (Acts and portions of Galatians are good starting points here). Paul’s point was not that churches ought to lack diversity of opinion, but rather that the members be “knit together” or “established” (καταρτίζω) with a shared mind and a single goal, one which transcended affiliations and sub-groups, and was instead rooted in their shared love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul returned to this theme later in the letter, stating that while he wished he could address more complex issues, partisan divisions were a failure of community at a bedrock level: *“For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not fleshly and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not all too human?”* (1 Cor. 3:3-4). In other words, in-fighting over allegiances other than Christ fails to live up to God’s intent for his people. Paul

even threw out the accusation that the Corinthians were acting in a “fleshly” way rather than as “spiritual persons” - a particularly strong insult given how central spiritual giftings were to the life of the Corinthian churches (see chapters 12-13).

It is in this context of community strife that Paul uttered a famous (and particularly alarming) verse: ***“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple”*** (1 Cor. 3:16-17). Over the years I have seen this verse used in preaching about everything from soft drinks to suicide, but in the scope of Paul’s argument it builds upon the problem of community division. Importantly, the Greek word for “you” is in the plural (“y’all” if you live in the South, “you guys” from my native New York), with a focus not on individual bodies but on the church as a gathering of God’s people. The thought here is straightforward: 1) the gathered church is God’s temple, 2) partisan behavior and allegiances bring division into the church community, 3) therefore, those who instigate division within the gathered church are attacking God’s temple.

Like the Corinthian churches, our Brethren in Christ congregations are local equivalents to God’s temple of old. God’s Spirit truly dwells within our gathered church communities. But political partisanship among our members threatens the unity that allows that presence to thrive. This does not mean that our churches ought to refrain from any discussion of today’s pressing issues, nor that our members should be forbidden to engage in voting or advocacy. Rather, we are to acknowledge the threat to our church communities (and God’s presence therein) that occurs when our members elevate political allegiances above a shared Christian identity. “Us versus Them” thinking disrupts God’s intention for the church as a diverse people united through Christ by attempting to replace it with a vision centered around political alignment.

Theme Study – *The “Sharing” of the Spirit*

Unity in the Christian community has at its root the idea that all of us share in the same experience of God’s Spirit, given to the people of God through the sacrificial life of Jesus Christ. God has graciously given his Spirit to the entire church community regardless of social status or identity, prior moral attainment, or any other boundary save for a genuine response to the message of Jesus.

The earliest Christians grasped the radical nature of this action, as their culture was one in which the wealthy only gave gifts to those whose social status ensured a “return on investment”. Women, children, slaves, and the poor were “unworthy” of such gifts. Yet the God revealed in Christ summoned all into a community marked not by hierarchy but by mutual love between peoples of all different walks. In this new community distinctions in status cast aside without also erasing the uniqueness of individual identity and experience. For example:

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many” (1 Cor. 12:13-14).

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26-28).

The shared experience of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-21) is also one of the defining beliefs that prompted the Brethren in Christ to *affirm* the calling and empowerment of women to ministry leadership.

For more on early Christian understandings of God’s gracious gift, and the work of the Spirit in Christian community, see:

- ***Paul and the Power of Grace* by John M.G. Barclay**
- ***God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* by Gordon D. Fee**

III. THE PERIL OF POLITICAL MESSIANISM

The classic 1965 science fiction novel *Dune* tells a story of political and religious intrigue on the outskirts of a galaxy-spanning civilization. At the center of the book's plot is planet named Arrakis, home to a harsh desert environment and a priceless resource – a combination that fuels armed conflicts between colonial powers and the expectation of a political savior by the planet's inhabitants. At one point in the novel a major character experiences a vision of his deceased father who announces: "*No more terrible disaster could befall your people than for them to fall into the hands of a Hero.*"

What this statement (and potentially the book as a whole) gets at is the danger of *political messianism* – the hope that powerful charismatic leaders can “course correct” society with the tools of political force. Readers of *Dune* and students of history might be aware that the danger of this view resides not only in the individuals that we elect, but also in the symbolism and mythology that we build up around them and their movements. After these myth systems have taken root there is a tendency for followers to engage in acts of division and even violence in defense of the “hero”. In our American context the clearest recent example is the January 2021 insurrection, during which armed individuals broke in to the U.S. Capitol building with the intent to kill (or die) because of myths about a failing culture, a strong leader, and a stolen vote.

The earliest followers of Jesus would have been well acquainted with this concept of political messianism. Travelers in the ancient Roman world would constantly pass by public inscriptions announcing the “good news” of Caesar Augustus as a “savior” sent by the gods to restore Roman virtue. Centuries of oppression under occupying empires led many Jews of Jesus's time to place their hope in a political intervention by God's chosen one, a belief likely seen at several points in the New Testament (Mark 10:35-45; Matt. 24:4-8; Acts 5:36-37, 21:38). What prompted the earliest Christian communities to resist the natural inclination towards political violence was their exposure to and continued reflection upon the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, who rejected the wider world's calls for a political savior.

It is important to stress that political ideologies, slogans, and soundbites must be viewed through the lens of Scripture rather than the language employed by those running for office. Genuine reflection on the person and teachings of Jesus must reside at the core of our political engagement, rather than personal preferences and proof-texting. *Jesus stressed that his kingdom “is not of this world” (John 18:36) and when offered the tools of political power to bring about God's will on the earth, he rejected them (Matt. 4:8-10).* And so we too must resist the temptation to view political power as the means to bring about the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That is a task only Jesus can do, not something that a politician can bring about through the tools of the state.

IV FOSTERING ENGAGED & UNIFIED CHURCHES

God has called us into loving, self-sacrificial community with himself and one another. Politicians, cable news networks, and social media echo chambers sew division for the sake of power, control, and advertising revenue. As we have seen, pressure from these actors threatens our Christian unity by prompting church members to view themselves primarily through the lens of political identity. Combatting this problem is a hard challenge, especially when folks are being “discipled” by the news or their phones for many more hours each week than they spend with others in their faith communities. That said, there are a few postures that are open to us.

The “Paul in Corinth” Approach: Prophetic Critique

In some pastoral situations we will need to act like Paul did with 1 Corinthians by addressing the problem of political polarization in direct, pointed ways in our preaching, teaching, and pastoral counseling. Our church members need to know that much of what passes for “political” in our culture is in fact sinful division. And while certain policies or issues may seem more in line with the Lord’s teachings (and may warrant our support), the tendency towards political allegiances and anointing parties or candidates as “God’s choice” is not. Whether caused by specific instigators or an entire community divided by election season, we ought to acknowledge how much damage political polarization does in our churches, express God’s warnings to those who would divide the community of faith along political lines, and reorient towards a “Lord Jesus Christ” perspective between Jesus-followers. At the same time we can express and model that there are healthy, God-honoring ways of engaging the social and political issues of our time. These are ideally summarized in Paul’s teaching from Romans 12:18: ***“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”*** The verses surrounding that statement resound with actions of sincere devotion to one another: sharing our material possessions, rejoicing with those who rejoice, mourning with those who mourn, treating others with a posture of humility, and responding to insult with blessing. Our love for one another within the community of faith, and towards those outside of our church walls, must always take priority over our political leanings.

The “Jerusalem Council” Approach: Promoting Dialogue

In other circumstances we might most benefit from following the example set by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Although not of a political nature, the divisions emerging in the early church over the admission of Gentiles marked a situation where separation based on “social identity markers” (circumcision and food laws) and the shared experience of the Spirit were at odds. I suspect that the event was a bit more heated than the summary found in Acts, but this event still models for us today a healthy approach to “opposing camps” within a church context. We can summarize its approach as follows: ***Conversation, Prayer, Spirit-Led Consensus***. The Council allowed the opportunity for members to share their experiences, their concerns, and their understandings of what Scripture spoke to recent events. These perspectives were received in a prayerful context rather than through gossip or in isolation from each other. And the final decisions were made *as a community* with the Spirit’s leading for how to move forward in a way that resolved the issue while preserving unity. Their decision: that social identities and affiliations ought never override what God has done in Christ for the community.

There are some excellent tools available for bringing this approach into our current political setting. One of these that I have personally participated in is the Peaceful Practices curriculum, which was built by the Mennonite Central Committee to assist churches in fostering an environment of healthy dialogue on various controversial topics of our time. Providing a space to discuss even divisive issues from a posture of shared humility helps to remind us that folks on “the other side” are our Christian brothers and sisters, and can promote healthier debate on the substance of issues rather than stereotyping about “them”. Perhaps following this model might help our church members to conclude, like those earliest Jesus-followers: ***“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a [political] yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are”*** (Acts 15:8-11). There is simply no room for “Us vs. Them” thinking in a church where both “us” and “them” have received the same grace. We may just need a reminder of that reality.

V. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Brethren in Christ Perspectives

- Various Authors, “Papers from the Sider Institute Conference: Confronting Christian Nationalism” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 46.1 (April 2023): pages 33-143.
- Various Authors, “Making Peace When We Disagree” *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 40.1 (Winter 2020).
- Various Authors, “Bridging the Divide” *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 37.2 (Spring 2017).
- Ronald J. Burwell & John R. Yeatts, “Who Are We Today?: The Brethren in Christ and Public Policy” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 12.3 (December 1989): pages 221-252.
- David Flowers, “On Being a Third Way Church” *Brethren in Christ U.S. Blog* (December 14, 2018) <https://bicus.org/2018/12/on-being-a-third-way-church>
- Ronald J. Sider, “An Anabaptist Perspective on Church, Government, Violence and Politics” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 28.2 (August 2005): pages 255-278.

Other Resources

- Jes Stoltzfus Buller, Kirstin De Mello & Ed Nyce, *Peaceful Practices: A Guide to Healthy Communication in Conflict*. Mennonite Central Committee. <https://mcc.org/peaceful-practices>
- John D. Roth, “The Anabaptist Vision of Politics” *Plough Quarterly* 24 (Spring 2020). <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/justice/politics/religious-liberty/the-anabaptist-vision-of-politics>
- Drew Strait, “Political Idolatry and White Christian Nationalism: Toward a Pastoral Hermeneutic of Resistance” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 96 (2022): pages 1-27.