

FAITH AND POLITICS

A FIVE-WEEK SERMON SERIES

#1: WAS JESUS POLITICAL?

"RENDER UNTO CAESAR" MAY PROVIDE A SURPRISING ANSWER

Definition of terms:

Politics. Derived from *Polis*, City (Greek). Pertaining to governance of a people, and the ordering of human community.

The Coin:



The inscription is "TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS," an abbreviation of "TIBERIVS CAESAR DIVI AVGVSTI FILIVS AVGVSTVS" — "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus." (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Sermon 1 Main Points

1. Jesus' message isn't just about individual, private spirituality; it's about public, social ethics. Jesus *was* political. But *how*?
2. Herodians and Pharisees were *parties*, and had opposing ideas about involvement with Rome.
3. The question they ask is meant to box Jesus in: to be unpopular with the people, or an enemy of Rome.
 - a. It has more to do with whether Jesus was a *revolutionary*.
4. Other possible religious responses to politics at the time
 - a. Overthrow Rome; establish theocracy, God as King (Zealots)
 - b. Escape politics and wait for God to fix things (Essenes, desert sect)
5. Jesus answer is clever, and "fuzzy"
 - a. Caesar claims to be son of god. His image is in on the coin, and everyone has it in their pockets.
 - i. What really does belong to Caesar?
 - b. Whose images is stamped in you? To whom do *you* belong and where is your ultimate loyalty in this life?
 - c. Does this call all Christians to be *political*? With clarity about our ultimate loyalty and values?

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#2: THE CITY OF GOD VS. THE EARTHLY CITY – POLITICAL VS. PARTISAN

Definition of terms:

Partisan. Feeling, showing, or deriving from strong and sometimes blind adherence to a particular party, faction, cause, or person

Images to ponder:



A poster for Barak Obama's presidential campaign, 2008; Reichsbishop Ludwig Müller, with Brown Shirts outside Wittenberg Cathedral, 1935

Sermon 2: Main Points

1. Key question from last week: how do we live in Caesar's world as people claimed by God? Especially when Caesar claims to BE God?
2. Using (Saint) Augustine of Hippo's masterpiece, *The City of God* to reflect on faith and politics.
 - a. Key contexts: 1) The fall of Rome, "the eternal city"; 2) Augustine's pessimistic view of human nature
3. Because of human imperfectability, our politics will never be perfect. State's purpose: to rein us in.
4. Today's KEY points:
 - a. We can never identify any human city with the eternal city (The City of God); we can never identify the Kingdom with any nation, ideology or party.
 - b. However, as citizens of heaven, ours is to live and promote the values of the Kingdom here on earth. We can be involved with politics, knowing politics will never save us.
5. Cautionary tales: Identifying our (ultimate) hope in any political leader. Obama? Hitler?
 - a. The Theological Declaration of Barmen: rejecting Hitler's co-opting of the church.
6. Implications: The church should equip us to be political, but never identify its agenda with any party or partisan ideology.

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#3: GOD ON OUR SIDE...OR, WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?



1887 cartoon printed in the satirical magazine *Puck*, depicting Republican Senator John Sherman for his use of "bloody shirt" memories of the Civil War

Sermon 3: Main Points

1. Main points from last week: 1) The church is called to be *political* but never *partisan* in its proclamation; we can never identify Christianity with any political ideology, leader or party.
 - a. A fine but bright line; these things are often in tension.
2. Today's question: How can we be passionate about our perception of the gospel's truth, while being open to those who see things differently?
 - a. Twain's *The War Prayer*. Warring parties each believe God's on *their* side.
3. The context of Lincoln's *Second Inaugural Address*
 - a. The North was days away from complete victory.
 - b. Most of the great theologians of the day (E.g. Henry Ward Beecher) saw the north's victory as God's vindication of their cause, and a justification for vengeance.
 - i. Victors "waving the bloody shirt," later became a rally cry for white supremacists
4. Lincoln's understanding of God's providence much more subtle than the theologians.
 - a. Lincoln wrestled with God's will: God can seemingly only be for one side.
 - b. A quote from Lincoln's personal notes: "In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party."
 - c. Astonishing theological idea: responsibility for the war may fall on both sides
5. Lincoln: God has judged both sides, all are suffering. The providence of God is NOT seen in God choosing winners and losers, but in our *compassion* toward one another.
6. An attitude appropriate for the Christian involved with politics: to be passionate enough to act with moral courage, and humble enough to listen to those who differ, as we *all* seek the truth.
 - a. In American we need people who believe in the truth; we have many who believe they are right. There's a large difference.

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Sermon 4: “John Calvin, Presbyterians, and this Whole Thing About Politics”

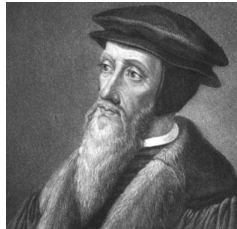
Recap:

- Politics is about governing our relationships with one another. From this perspective, Jesus—and the very gospel, itself—is political (not partisan).
- As Christian people, our allegiance is first to the kingdom of God.

The main question from last week: *Are we seeking God’s truth or are we seeking to be right?*



Image: “The Best Supper” © Jan Richardson



John Calvin (July 10, 1509 – May 27, 1564)

Originally trained as a lawyer, Calvin was a French theologian, pastor, and reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation. He is the author of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* and considered one of the principal figures in the development of Reformed Theology; the theological tradition of which the PC(USA) is a part of.

From Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

- Contrary to other reformers at the time, Calvin had a high view of government and found politics a useful means to restrain evil, promote the good, and defend the gospel.
- Calvin believed civil authorities to be ordained by God (Rom. 13) and that it is our Christian duty to submit to those authorities so long as they were held accountable to the will of God.
- Calvin did not advocate for Christian government or a theocracy. Rather, Calvin was concerned with how the individual Christian submits themselves to the will of God and seeks to be faithful.
- Calvin understood politics as a useful tool to accomplishing that end.

From the PC(USA) Book of Order:

- We are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. (F–3.0104)
- There are truths and forms with respect to which persons of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty of both private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (F–3.0105)

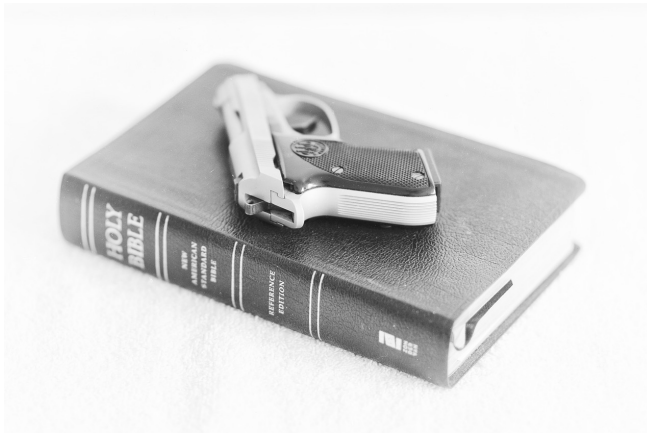
From Scripture:

- “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13.34).
- Jesus prays for his disciples and those who would become his disciples, that they would be *one*. For in their unity, despite their diversity, the world would know that God loves them (Jn. 17.20-23).

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#5: CAN THE SCRIPTURES GUIDE OUR THINKING ON GUN CONTROL?



Sermon 5: Main Points

1. In today's sermon we'll use the issue of gun control to test drive two of the main concepts we've been discussing: 1) The church is called to be *political*. 2) The church must avoid being *partisan*.
2. How we apply the Bible, and understand preaching, is critical
 - a. Some preachers/churches don't take positions on political issues; encourage individuals.
 - b. Historically, though not all individuals will agree, Presbyterians take a stand on issues.
 - c. The preacher's job: teach scripture so listeners can apply it using their own conscience.
 - i. To "hit you with the book?" This is the *prophetic* tradition. (e.g. Jeremiah)
 - ii. Preacher should never tell you how to think, but to help you think for yourself, as scripture speaks directly to your conscience.
3. Gun control: how does scripture guide us?
 - a. Jesus' time: the state's power derives from violence; it is not an individual right.
 - i. 1 Peter: Do not abuse individual freedom; honor the emperor.
 - b. Second amendment: fear of centralized (federal) power to become tyrannical
 - c. Only in 2008 did Supreme Court determine this could be an individual (limited) right.
 - d. It's been construed as a nearly *unlimited* individual right.
4. We need to be careful of "proof texting": a few texts to justify our pre-existing point-of-view
 - a. Applying the main message of scripture to any part, here's a bottom-line question: would Jesus be packing an AK-47? Or countenance their use by individuals?
 - b. Jesus' saying, "Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword," indicates the larger message of the New Testament: we are not to solve violence with violence.
5. Gun control's proven effective; most are for sensible gun control. Why has it not happened?
 - a. We can NEVER believe that violence is inevitable, or we can't respond to the evil that creates gun violence.