

The Preacher as Politician

Kenton C. Anderson
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Politics and preaching have always been uneasy partners. I write these words in the aftermath of one of the most contentious political campaigns we have ever seen in North America. Leading from the pulpit in this context has been extremely challenging for preachers, regardless of their personal leanings. I was always taught that preachers should not play politics from the pulpit, which sounds good in theory, but which has been virtually impossible in these divided days.

The role of the preacher as politician is inescapable, though perhaps not in the partisan way that we most readily understand. I'm speaking about the way by which our preaching engages and manages the power dynamics and relationships that exist within the congregation. This kind of politics cannot be avoided and is of great importance to the preaching that we offer.

The American Heritage Dictionary (definition #6) describes "politics" as "intrigue or maneuvering within a political unit or a group in order to gain control or power." Boy, does this sound familiar! Even the most peaceful and loving congregations I have served have featured some element of this intrigue. As a preacher, I have often thought to choose my words with care to avoid unwanted difficulty or to try to shed some light upon a touchy subject. While I prefer to think of this work as pastoral, it can't be denied that there is more than a touch of politics within it.

Preaching is primarily the proclamation of the good news of the gospel, the announcement of God's coming Kingdom, and the exposition of His Word. But as the pastor's most public, regularly occurring communication with the congregation, it is also a profound act of leadership. Preaching is more than governance – much more – but it is certainly not less than that.

There are several governance tasks that the pastor can offer through the weekly sermon. Preaching can give direction to the congregation. The sermon is not a stump speech, but it can and should describe the vision and direction that God is revealing for His people through His Word. While this might fall short of articulating policy for the body, preaching will support the positions and directions that God is calling His people to embrace.

Preaching can be a way of gathering support, creating a collaborative environment as the church comes together in pursuit of God's calling. A significant part of politicking is to call people to join a collective vision. Preachers, similarly, are calling people to join in partnership with the God who is building His Kingdom.

Preachers also work to manage dissent in a manner that might feel political at times. While we prefer to articulate the positive, preaching sometimes must be felt as a rebuke or challenge to those united in their opposition to the will and call of God for the church. The apostles in Scripture were not shy to exercise this sort of politics (eg. Philippians 4:2), but always offered in a gracious and loving spirit.

The better politicians understand their work as public service. The better preachers also understand their role as humble servant more than as heroic leader (1 Peter 5:1-4). If politics can be seen as service, then preaching all the more.

Politics seems a cynical pursuit by comparison to our call to preach. I remember as a young, aspiring preacher hearing an older pastor say, "Never, ever, ever, step down from the pulpit, to become Prime Minister." I've since learned that the expression was not original to him. It has also been said, 'Don't step down from your calling as preacher to become King or President.' At the time, I heard this message as hyperbole, but as I've grown in age and in maturity I have come to understand its truth. The politics of man will have a fleeting impact. But governing among the people of God, leading people well through the preaching that we offer, can have eternal impact.

I appreciate those Christians who exercise their calling from God within the political arena, but I know where the true power lies. The politics of our earthly congresses and commonwealths will always fall short of a holy aspiration. Our most profound political prayer must always be, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Kenton C. Anderson,

President of Providence University College and
Theological Seminary in Otterburne Manitoba.