

Introduction

This morning, we have decided that we see the landmine out there called “Politics.” It is sitting out there, looming large, and we could avoid it—for a while. But like it or not, because of our American political system and media, we will all be confronted with it somehow in the coming days (if not already). So, we decided, why not run out there, poke at that with a stick, and see what happens! And the elders said, here Ryan, take this stick, now just poke a little bit that way...

I joke, but we know this is a difficult topic and sensitive in many ways. We, as elders, do not believe that we in any way are here to dictate how you vote or engage in politics—that is a goal we hope you see this morning and you can see why we believe that. But even more important than that statement, we want you to hear again and again that our main goal this morning is to work towards unity—not uniformity—as a church. And specifically, unity in our identity as the very people of God. This is coming straight out of our series here in Ephesians:

“In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to **unite** all

things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”
(Ephesians 1:7–10, ESV)

If we were to talk about the Mission of God, this passage would be one of the go-to passages. God’s mission is to unite all things in heaven and on earth in Jesus Christ. We as his church, his people, want to be on mission with him. And we want to make sure that, after this morning and a discussion about politics that you walk away believing that our main goal AS A CHURCH, and even your main goal as individual Christians, is to present JESUS CHRIST PLUS NOTHING to a watching world. Not Jesus and doing good, not Jesus plus a particular sin area cleaned up first, not Jesus and my favorite issue or political party. Just as God is summing up all things in Jesus, we too want people to see Jesus as the only thing they need. We want to be careful to not inadvertently connect anything to Jesus as a barrier or Jesus + some other idea or position would make someone more holy and acceptable to God.

We as elders want to teach the glories and beauty of God’s character, his amazing ways, the standard we strive to uphold, understand, and worship. And we know we will all fall short which is why we desperately need Christ! We don’t put a barrier to anyone coming to Christ because of their maturity or growth in knowledge or wisdom.

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the

redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23–24, ESV)

This is the foundation of our discussion this morning, and we pray you don’t hear anything we say as trying to add to that beautiful truth. We are looking for unity in Christ, not uniformity. In fact, we believe that the lack of uniformity can often be God’s plan to demonstrate the fullness of his glory in our body WHEN we are unified in Jesus as our greatest hope. We can’t say enough about that so we will make sure Bren ends our talk with more on this idea, so I will leave some room for him to say more later.

Christian Political Spectrum Background

I would like to invite the elders up here to our panel this morning—we are missing one, John Mitchell, but I am thankful to have others up here to dodge the bullets with me.

This morning will be part preaching/teaching as we talk about Scripture and ideas, and part panel discussion. It will be about 50/50, so don’t be surprised when I talk a little longer at points to help set the ground for different sections of our discussion. They know I’m going to do that, I’m not just ignoring them!

I want to start with a quick background on the different Christian political views. As I have read there seem to be four main views from which spring all other views. The first is

the Catholic view which started, really, at Constantine in 324 AD made Christianity the main religion of the Roman Empire. This view is called the “Synthetic” view, which really enmeshes Christianity with the state or politics. It has become the standard view of the Catholic church, so much so that at times during history you can’t tell the difference between the church and government. It has at its core the belief that life in the church and life outside the church are both there to MAKE people Christian, sort of a “sacramental” view as Catholics would call, so they both should be used and leveraged to help people become Christian and grow as Christians. So at times it is okay to even have religion mandated in some ways. That isn’t the Catholic view today, but that is where this view has lead historically.

Of course, all Protestant churches sprang from this background, and we ended up with three other main views. Of course, there was one view that went the entirely opposite direction. This was “Separationists.” These are people like the Amish, Bretheren, and Mennonite. Because they were persecuted by the government for many of their views, they decided they wouldn’t engage in government or politics, and rather held the view that the church should be like a light on a hill in the midst of a dark world, and people should find religion and the church as a refuge outside of the normal government and politics that they engage in.

On the other side, many of the reformers tried to “reform” the Catholic view. These were the broader protestant

movements by Calvin and others. They became known as “Transformationists.” They believed that God was sovereign over all spheres, and while there was a clear difference between what the state and church do and their goals, they wanted to get involved in government and politics as a way to redeem all vocations and see God glorified, as much as possible, in all spheres—even politics. They run a spectrum from simply being involved in politics to advocating explicitly for Christian beliefs in the public realm.

As a weird quirk, Lutherans ended up landing in the middle. While they started out Transformationists as well and did a lot of that type of work originally. But, because they aligned with many different state rulers and made them the guardians of their faith and churches, they ended up becoming dualists in a sense, and represent the view called “Paradoxical.” They view the importance of the role of the church in salvation as primary, and then view the role of the state as a completely different role. They have a “two kingdom” view that has different goals for each sphere (church and government or politics), and somewhat views the government with some suspicion. Throughout history they were often accused of “quietism” or not being willing to speak up when necessary (often to keep their prince/king happy), though there is a move away from that in some spheres today.

Most Christian political engagements are a mix of these or sprout from these. Even the black church in America has a

mix of separationist tones and paradoxical tones. They are often termed “Prophetic,” but that it is a mix between these.

We see a spectrum, then, from Separationists to Paradoxical to Transformationists (which is very close to Synthetic). With that in mind, I want to start with some questions for our elders.

Q. Have you ever been VERY involved in something political (marched in a protest or march, put out signs, campaigned, etc.)?

Q. Have you ever not voted or abstained from the political process by conscience (e.g. on purpose)?

Q. Which of these positions (or mix of positions) would you say exemplify how you have and do approach politics?

Q. If this is a spectrum (from uninvolved to very involved), is there anything we should be concerned at either of those edges (people who are either apathetic to politics or extremely engaged with politics)?

The goal of starting at this highest level was to show that there isn't even agreement amongst Christians on HOW MUCH to be involved with politics and government, let alone exactly HOW TO be involved if/when you get involved. We should be very generous when it comes to the ways we DO

engage one another in it. This should help us start on the path of charity towards one another.

I appreciated that several places I looked tried to mention the commonality between all these positions (when they are acting Godly). They would say there is broad agreement on:

1. The importance of governing institutions.
2. The importance of civil society/free associations.
3. A concern for cultivating virtue in individuals and working towards a more virtuous society.
4. Most importantly, the centrality of the church and its witness to the gospel.

On this last one, I loved this quote:

“The church is not presented in the Bible as simply another voice in the competing cacophony of shouted slogans but rather that still small voice that testifies to what God has done for us in Christ, that he so loved the world that he gave Christ to die for it, so that all who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). This is the message of the church, and to reduce it to a mere political agenda is to sell short the glory of the gospel. The Christian faith is not, at its heart, a political message, but a spiritual one.” Strange, *Empowered Witness*, 120

Q. Is there a uniqueness to the role of the church that government/politics can't do?

Politics Matter Because Justice Matters

I think this begs the question, “Do we need to care about politics at all?” We would all say that politics matters BECAUSE justice matters. You may find that a bit weird but let me explain the thought here.

In Scripture, justice is making righteous judgements, or judgements according to God's righteousness. We see this when God first talks to Abraham in Genesis 18:19. Abraham and his descendants are called to bless the nations around them:

“by doing righteousness and justice” (Gen 18:19, ESV)

Of the 125 times that the word justice appears in the Old Testament, it is paired with righteousness 44 times (about a third of the time). What we see is the standard for justice is God's righteousness. What God says is right (and the rights he gives to us) are good and just to uphold. That is justice.

In that sense, justice and judgement can be interchangeable in Scripture.

Justice = making a judgement according to God's righteousness.

We see this played out many times in Scripture. In general, we see it in places like Proverbs 29:4:

“by justice [i.e. applying righteous judgements] a king builds up the land” (Prov 29:4, ESV)

[Justice uses] a just balance and scale (Proverbs 16:11)

“You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous.” (Deuteronomy 16:19, ESV)

One of the most iconic examples is King Solomon suggesting that they split the baby that is being fought over by the two mothers. Once he has given his idea and everyone sees how he rightly came to a good judgement, it is said in 1 Kings 3:28:

“[All Israel] stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.” (1 Kings 3:28, ESV)

In this way, all Christians should passionately care about justice because God cares about justice. He cares that his

righteous ways are carried out well. Justice characterizes God!

“he has established his throne for justice” (Ps 9:7)

he practices and delights in righteousness (Jer 9:24)

“every morning he shows forth his justice (Zeph 3:5)

“righteousness and justice are the foundation of [God’s] throne” (Ps 89:14)

“[he] is exalted in justice” (Isa 5:16)

We can also see how we should care about justice when we think about our salvation. We have been *justified*—declared just by God because he gave justice to Jesus in our place. Jesus took the penalty that was just so that God would not be made a liar by accepting us. That type of justice should make us very interested in how justice is shown today. For Christians, just like genuine faith results in good deeds, and doing good deeds gives evidence to faith (Matt 7:15–20; James 2:14–26), we can similarly deduce that being justified by God (receiving his mercy in justice) results in a desire to do justice, and doing justice gives evidence of being justified.

Add to all this one last piece that God says that government exists to help make sure justice happens.

“And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.”
(Genesis 9:5, ESV)

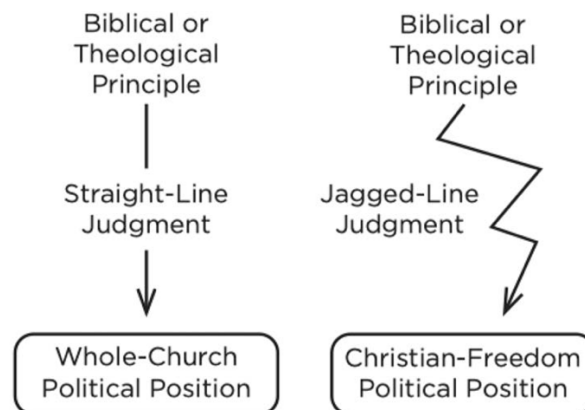
“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. (Romans 13:1–7, ESV)

Q. Would we say that politics, or justice, in one sense is something we all run into either interpersonally or in culture when we consider how to do justice or oppose bad justice? Can we escape this idea of politics or justice?

Some Wisdom on Politics: Straight Vs Jagged Lines

As we all thought about the reality of needing to engage politics as Christians, knowing justice and therefore politics do matter to God, we tried to think through what is the best wisdom we could pass on to our body. And again, wisdom is not always written word-for-word in Scripture. Wisdom is how to apply a lot of the Scripture we just looked at in a wise way that would honor God.

We found this concept very helpful to us: there may be moments where we, as a church can draw a straight-line from a biblical or theological principle we find in Scripture to a desired outcome or principle, but that same biblical or theological principal may be a much more jagged line or path when we try to decide how each Christian individual moves from that principle to a practical policy or outworking of justice. And often times, even for the church, it is not a simple straight line for us.



To help make this clearer let me give you an example:

“When one man’s ox butts another’s, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and share its price, and the dead beast also they shall share.” (Exodus 21:35, ESV)

Now, you may be wondering why this would ever apply to you. You likely don't have an ox. But let's change this more appropriate to today. Your car hits another person's car, and their car is now dead! According to Exodus 21:35, we should sell both your car and the broken car and split the money. I think we would all agree with the straight-line principle here that the church can teach on clearly.

When your property damages another person's property →
You owe them restitution

I really don't think this is very contentious for any of us. We all believe this and would want to see people restored in some fashion when they are damaged financially or with their property somehow. It ISN'T quite so simple when you try to apply it at the personal and specific level. What do you do when the cars are not of equal value? Should you still split the cost? What if one person is very poor and can't afford to pay the other back? Do we put them in jail instead (that is what used to happen earlier on in our country's history), or do we give them a pass, or what?

We can see from this example that the straight line that we would preach on here at Rev is clear and we can preach it boldly—you should give someone restitution when you cause them damage. It is much more complicated when we try to work it out practically/politically. It gets even harder when you try to do it at a national or generic level. We see this where we make laws that people need car insurance to

drive a car, but many don't, so you also have to debate if you want uninsured insurance as well.

Add to this that we would also want someone to rightly treasure that they are forgiven even if they hit our car! That Jesus is more than sufficient for any problems caused by that moment. We would want Romans 8:1 to be proclaimed clearly to them:

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1, ESV)

Some Reasons Why We Disagree in Politics/Justice

Using this framework, we can also begin to see why we may disagree so much in these political or justice type decisions.

1. In America, the right and the left in politics tend to emphasize different aspects of the government's work of dispensing justice:

The right tends to emphasize punishing wrongdoers (generally).

The left tends to emphasize lifting-up the wronged (generally).

So, we may see this emphasized as one law or policy trying to protect the person whose car is hit, while another policy

may be to punish the one who hit the car. Or perhaps protect those who may be vulnerable financially so they aren't unduly punished.

Q. Do you see both sides of our American political spectrum as having good aspects of justice that they emphasize?

Another issue that can cause some of our disagreement is that:

2. **Politics** (and political parties) require alliances.

This means no matter your feelings on the issue of how to protect people's property like their car, you may need to partner with people on other issues you don't care for or really don't like to get any sort of policy passed. This may not seem hard when we are only talking about issues like repaying a damaged car, but it may be harder when we think about more weighty issues.

[Rich] Is it ethically wrong for someone to vote for a party/person when they believe part of their stance or platform is against God's righteous justice?

The next two reasons we can have disagreements go together:

3. **Christians** have different degrees of wisdom for making political/justice judgements.
4. Each Christian tends to believe we have more wisdom than those Christians who differ.

All of us think our idea of what to do is best! None of us, by default, when we enter a disagreement think to ourselves, “You know, my idea is probably dumb or the weak idea and I should really listen to others well.” And, we all can grow in wisdom. Would you want 10, 12, 14 year old you making laws for others today? Aren’t you glad you grew in wisdom and understanding, and maybe, still could grow in wisdom and understanding?

Q. Do you think this is true (in sin) of your heart regarding politics—that you assumed you were smarter than everyone else and knew the best answer?

Q. Have you ever had a time where you realized, after the fact, that your political choice didn’t promote justice as much as you hoped it would.

Q. Has your ability to understand justice/political position changed over time?

The Difficulty of Straight-Line to Jagged-Line Issues

As I said, we picked an easy example. It is even more difficult when we look at some other, more sensitive issues.

Q. What are some examples of other straight-line issues and how they become jagged-lines when we try to implement them politically?

[Bren] Marriage

[Steve] Image of God and ethnicity

[Ryan] Abortion

Abortion is a hard topic. As a church, we would draw a straight line from Exodus 20:13 and the commandment to not kill, as well as other laws in Exodus, like Exodus 21:23–25, to the principle that abortion is murder and something that should not happen. Outside of a small debate about the exact moment life begins, we would say that a fetus is a baby is a human, and to kill it is to murder a person.

And I would always want to start with the reminder that there is grace for this in Jesus Christ. All of us are murders, those who in every sin stand at the cross and yell, “Crucify him!” So we are all no less

in need of God's forgiveness in Christ as someone who has had an abortion.

And this is very complicated to enact. We must consider some of the atrocious situations that may have preceded the desire for an abortion, like incest or rape. We must care about the woman and her health and struggles. We must care about the child we would say shouldn't be killed but may not be able to be provided for. We must consider if a total ban the best way to engage an unbelieving world on this question or is an incremental approach better. The principle may be straight, the enactment is a jagged-line and different Christians will have different wisdom and conscience on how best to enact good and just policies.

[Rich] Care for the Poor

What is a Christian to Do?

With all this in mind, what is it we should encourage a Christian to do.

1. [Ryan] We MUST respect fellow Christians who have differently calibrated consciences and wisdom on the jagged-line issues (usually of how to implement any idea).

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.” (Romans 14:1, ESV)

The word translated “opinions” here in the ESV is also translated as matters of conscience, or disputable matters in the NIV. Most issues of politics, especially when we try to put them into practice, are jagged-line issues. They are debatable. There may be a principle behind it that is straight-line and that the church will preach on, but how we implement that is fraught with so many different choices. Add that to the reality that we have mostly been talking about single issues. Most elections are about a bucket of issues, where you have to weigh many good issues against one another. And one person’s wisdom on how to best do that may be quite different than another’s.

We are not saying that there are not weak or strong positions. We are not saying that we shouldn’t, on the personal level, have debates about them. We ARE saying that we should be able to, as a church, demonstrate a kind of love for one another IN these differences. Romans 14:1 is a command—not a suggestion. We must love each other this way. It doesn’t say, “Unless it is politics, then flame one another!” One of the greatest things we can do when it comes to politics is have great charity because of the nature of these straight vs jagged-line realities, and have humility

on our own ability to judge rightly, and work hardest to love one another in these issues.

2. [Steve] **We MUST** seek out truth and knowledge of God through his Word.

[Just ideas...let me know if you want to use this.]
Peter (Acts 10:9–16). He needed God to calibrate him through his word that he would relate lovingly with the Gentiles.

3. [Bren] **We MUST** present the Gospel of Jesus Christ PLUS NOTHING!

[Just ideas...let me know if you want to use any of these.]

“Treating most issues as a straight-line harmfully fuses what is central and essential to Christianity with particular political policies.”

Paul Tillich drew a straight line from Christian ideas to socialism.

Nazis tried to draw a straight line from Christian ideas to

Nazism.

Many today try to draw a straight line from Christian principles and values to a particular policy, party, or goals.

1 Corinthians 1:31–2:5

1 Cor 15:3

Prayer

“Father, when we disagree with one another on complex political issues, would you please help us to disagree in a way that pleases you? Give us courage to be faithfully countercultural and to represent you truthfully to non-Christians. Please give us wisdom to love and forbear when we disagree about political judgements. Please unite us to accomplish the mission Christ gave the church.”