

Practical religion and political preaching from the pulpit



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Many people, religious and non-religious, seem to be confused about religion and politics. Should they have any connection at all? Should one have any control over the other? Can religious belief have any influence over government? A commenter on social media stated: "politics should not be in the pulpit."

To me, politics means representative leadership. In a manner of speaking, shouldn't the same be true for clergy? Traditionally, clergy have been representatives for the People of God, and for God. But what about preacher-politicians or political preachers?

The great American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote: "I suppose it is not wise, not being natural, to belong to any religious party ... A sect or party is an elegant incognito devised to save a [person] from the vexation of thinking" (Journal, June, 1831). In his view, it is not only unwise to identify with one primary exclusive sectarian group, but unnatural. Hiding behind a banner of belief (incognito) can be a convenient way of avoiding independent thinking.

Reading the wise and perceptive views of the "forgotten founder," Thomas Paine, I came across these lines: "Practical religion consists in doing good: and the only way of serving God is that of endeavoring to make His creation happy. All preaching that [does not have] this for its object, is nonsense and hypocrisy." (Agrarian Justice, 1797). Considering the question whether the pulpit is an appropriate place for political preaching, Paine's guideline seems fair. The tricky part is to make sense of what "doing good" means, and what making the created world happy means, in practice.

Is there any biblical context for this practical preaching? We might call attention to one of the most political sermons in history. Jesus stood in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4).

Poor people and prisoners, blind and oppressed persons. Proclaiming freedom, recovery – "Good news." Notice Jesus isn't talking about salvation or heaven, he doesn't use spiritual, otherworldly language. He speaks to real people who are suffering in the here and now. Though many Christians have interpreted these words in a super-natural way, avoiding the uncomfortable fact Jesus uses words of liberation, it's fairly clear that he chose to read those words from Isaiah for a reason. The challenge is presented: these words have been fulfilled. Have they? How? It seems to me the meaning is clear: what do people in poverty need to hear? What do prisoners need? What do people with physical impairments need? Who is oppressed, and why?

Following the guidance of Thomas Paine: Who is responsible for doing good, for making people happy, for living out true practical religion? If someone believes Jesus meant to do all these good works of liberation himself, what's the purpose of "following" him?

At the intersection of religion and politics, the question arises: Can a person of faith be an elected political leader? Of course, many have been and continue to be in those positions. The more appropriate question becomes: Are they representing all citizens, of any and all beliefs? If a politician merely uses her/

his position as a pulpit, to preach about their chosen faith, with little concern for those in the population who have different beliefs, I would say they're in the wrong job. Representative government should be representative. And, there can be no "establishment" of religion, or any religion, in a country founded on a secular Constitution (with no mention of God, Jesus or the Bible).

Freedom of religion has to be paramount in any discussion of faith and politics. Not simply freedom for some, but freedom of conscience for everyone. The obvious related question is: How does a clergyperson handle politics from the pulpit? I would say, carefully, thoughtfully! A Christian minister or priest could take Jesus' example to heart. Speak up and speak out against injustice (problems in the justice system, oppressive policies, in healthcare, etc.). Teaching or preaching about political issues like these, matters that effect everyone, doesn't mean endorsing candidates or waving the flag of one party.

Following the model of Jesus' practice of active service, would naturally address community needs, even when unpopular. Otherwise, any "good news" becomes "bad news" – impractical and fundamentally irrelevant.

Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).