

When Christians Get it Wrong: When Christianity Get Married to Politics  
18 October 2009 Mark Statler

Today we continue in a series of messages called "When Christians Get it Wrong". We're looking at the research of the Barna Group and a man named David Kinnaman. What this research has uncovered is a real challenge to Christians to take a look at what our words and actions communicate to the world around us because many people are opting out of the church and Christianity. Kinnaman has found that people are drawn to Jesus, but they're repelled by Christians. So in this series, we're trying to understand what these people, particularly young adults, might say to us to help us be better followers of Jesus.

One of the major issues Kinnaman and the Barna Group uncovered in their research relates to the way Christians engage in politics, so today we're going to be addressing when our *faith and politics get married!* And I have to tell you, I've been nervous about this message all week! I've been choosing words carefully because I have this fear that I'm going to say something and someone out there is going to say, "See, I told you Pastor Mark was a Republicrat! I'm not sure I can ever listen to him again. He obviously doesn't know that Jesus is a Demublican!"

Politics brings out a lot of different emotions in people. Sometimes people feel hopeful and empowered by political ideas and campaign promises and at the same time we feel betrayed or disillusioned by the people we elect if when we think they have abandoned those promises. We can get passionate and immovable about political agendas and at the same time feel frustrated by partisan politics that end in stalemates and fail to address issues in any way. In every election there are people who are elated and people who feel defeated. So politics brings all these emotions and sensitivities out in us, so as we get going, I want to take just a few minutes to lay out exactly what the purpose of this message is and is not and what we all stand to gain from being open and teachable. Here are some assumptions I am working with:

1. You and I are here today because we are a follower of Jesus or are interested in what it means to be a followers of Jesus, we **share a common faith**, so the primary purpose of this message is about helping us all connecting to God's love and improve the ways we share that love with the world.

2. **Today's message is not a debate about political views.** Jesus was not politically motivated, he was Kingdom of God motivated. If you've been to Coffee with the Pastor in the last ten years, you have heard Aaron or me say, "Saint Paul's is not about political causes". We are not here to tell you what your politics are because it is not our mission to create legislation. We are here to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ and that is a kingdom of God mission, not a political mission.

3. **When it comes to faith and politics, Christians OFTEN get it wrong.** How many times in your own conversations and debates with other Christians have you been able to say, "They were so gracious and understanding. They were quick to listen and slow to speak. And when they did speak, even words of disagreement, I felt accepted and not judged." Think back to previous political discussions or debates with other Christians. Were you able to say those kinds of things about the other person? More importantly, were they able to say those things about you?! Yea, only if you were in perfect agreement, right?

Today's message is not about changing our political views. It's about engaging in politics and the civic arena in ways that represent the character and grace of God. Your pastors here at Saint Paul's want you to be politically involved. We want to encourage you to be knowledgeable about current national and local issues, to participate in politics by voting and even by running for office or volunteering. We also want you to remember that in any aspect of life, politics, business, or personal, we are called to represent the love of Jesus Christ and to lead people to an active faith in him.

What David Kinnaman's research lifts up is not that the young people who have checked out of church think that Christians should be a-political. They are ok with Christians having political views, they are just turned off by the way Christians engage in politics, with our behavior and language and attitudes. So now let's look at a few ways we get this wrong...these are teachable moments...examples from which we can all learn, no matter our political affiliation.

One of the ways we get it wrong is that we engage in **gossip, slander and false witness.**

Shortly after our last presidential election an email was circulated through Christian circles that our new president is the anti-christ. There was a list of reasons why this was the case along with several urges for Christians to pray. Most of the references came from the book of Revelation, where, according to the email, there is a description of the anti-christ that resembles the president. Now this email was a long way from its origin so many Christians had read and forwarded this vital information to other Christians until it found its way to me. That means that lots of people had participated in spreading this alarm along.

The problem is that this email makes maliciously slanderous accusations that are not well founded...but no one stops to check out if what they are passing on is really true before passing it on. The book of Revelation never, ever, mentions an anti-christ. The phrase comes from the letters of John. Revelation never makes the claim that the beast of chapter 13 is the anti-christ. The word is never used. And many of the other scripture references used in this email are so far out of context that it is an abuse of scripture.

And just so you don't think I'm a Republicrat, this is not a one party issue. All you have to do is google a president's name + anti-christ and you will find out from someone exactly how that president is the devil incarnate. George Bush, according to some, is the anti-christ. Bill Clinton, there were a few who thought the same of him. George HW Bush, Ronald Reagan – anti-christs. I was a freshman in college the year Reagan was elected to his first term. An administrator at my college told me that Ronald Reagan was the anti-christ because there were 6 letters in each of his names, "Ronald Wilson Reagan". I would say that's a fairly academic approach; researched, thought-through, difficult to disprove...(there's your dose of sarcasm for today).

Ok, here's where this is going. To call anyone an anti-christ means to call them the devil incarnate...the personification of evil. That means that there is no goodness, no truth, no love, no faith, no redeeming quality, no motive other than destruction in that person. If you call someone the anti-christ without knowing for sure that they are, then you have committed malicious slander and have borne false witness against them.

And you may say, "well, I haven't called anyone the anti-christ" and maybe you haven't read or forwarded those messages. But maybe you have forwarded the messages loaded with slanderous gossip filled with half-truths. (a few weeks ago – one about the president indoctrinating all the school kids with socialism in 10 minute speech – I read that speech and there was plenty about students taking personal responsibility for their education, but I didn't see the Marxist Manifesto). It's important to check out some of the claims you will be receiving, especially the politically motivated email alerts because they are filled with twisted truths and it doesn't matter which agenda they support. You need to research and discover if what they proclaim is really true, because spreading falsehoods is contributing to **gossip, slander and false witness** and that's what people see and it doesn't match up with what they already know about the nature and character of Jesus and his message. And they are right!

Just so you know, this doesn't just happen out there in cyberspace. It happened one night at the dinner table at Wednesday Night Live just before the election last year. Fear-filled gossip and slanderous comments calling one of the candidates the devil. Right here in our church! We know this from someone sitting at that table. It wasn't just one person making the comments, it was the rest of the table in agreement. One person from that table sent us a note and asked if this is what our church is about. I have to tell you, that just really makes me angry. Someone who joins us on Wednesday Nights to experience God's love and grow in their faith and be encouraged and lifted up by fellow Christians sits down to hear slander and gossip and fear-mongering politics that aligns God and our faith with the candidate of their choice. And that witness to this event was made to feel that if they disagreed, then they wouldn't be welcome.

That's not just slander, that's also **intolerance** – which is another way we get it wrong. Again, intolerance is not just a one party issue. In the 2004 Election, we lived in Hannibal, MO. I remember one day that one of the church leaders said that he didn't see how anyone can be a Christian and vote for George Bush! I guess he just assumed that his view was error free, that people with any other opinion or viewpoint were just ignoramuses. I guess I should take it as a compliment that he assumed I must be voting for John Kerry. I guess he didn't consider me to be ignorant. But I have to tell you, his level of intolerance was so great that I was uncomfortable. I wanted to challenge him, but

if I had challenged him, his intolerance was so high that there would not have been any fruitful result. Funny thing is that just the next day, another church leader said, "I don't know how you can be a Christian and vote for a democrat! Except it's really not funny. It's very, very sad. Because intolerance can get much uglier than that. It can get hateful, judgmental and even violent. And people who call themselves followers of Jesus have been all of those over and over again in the political arena.

People who are put off to Christianity see us behave like this and they wonder if we don't know our own Bible. They know that James teaches us to be quick to listen and slow to speak. They know that hateful, judgmental, and intolerant behavior is very disconnected from the character of Jesus. Our intolerance pushes people away from the God who created them. We need to repent from intolerance and live out our faith in ways that represent the character of Jesus.

Paul was not specifically addressing conflict over politics in this passage from Ephesians chapter 4, but in my opinion these words apply to the way we engage in politics and so much more...

**<sup>1</sup> As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. <sup>2</sup> Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.**

**Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God (in other words, break God's heart), with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. <sup>1</sup> Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God**

That's the spirit with which we engage in politics. These things; gossip, slander and false witness, intolerance...these things are wrong no matter who does them. But how completely devastating to the mission of Jesus is it when Christians do this? It's devastating when we do these things because it communicates that we believe God is like this...Jesus is like that.

How did Christians get to the place where we do these things? We get there when we become more passionate about our political agendas than we are about the gospel of Jesus. We Christ followers get it wrong when we have adopted the wrong mission. When political agendas and winning moral causes becomes more important to us than fulfilling the mission of Christ...Loving God, Loving Others, Serving the world. We want to win our political cause so we marry our politics with our faith and we place God on our side of the battle and we go to ideological war. When we go to war, there are lots of casualties, including the very purpose for which Jesus came, which was not to win moral victories, but to free people from their sin and judgment and lead them to life with God.

As we wrap this up today, I think it's important for us to take a look at an encounter Jesus had with some politicians who were trying to trap him. This story takes place during the week of Jesus' crucifixion. The authorities were trying to find an expedient way to be rid of him, so they set up a trap.

**Matthew 22:15-22 TNIV <sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. <sup>16</sup> They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians (the Herodians were Jews who supported King Herod – they were very politically minded and power hungry). "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. <sup>17</sup> Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax <sup>[a]</sup> to Caesar or not?"**

This is a great set up...it is a cunning trap. If Jesus says to pay the taxes, then he loses support among the common people who follow him because they all hate Roman authority. If he says not to pay taxes, then he have him on sedition charges with ample witnesses to condemn him to death in a roman court.

**<sup>18</sup> But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, <sup>20</sup> and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"**

<sup>21</sup> "Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

<sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away

Jesus was saying to give to the world what is the world's and give to God what is God's. Politics and taxes – those things belong to the world- they have the image of government on them. What is it that belongs to God? What has God's image on it? Let's go way back to one of the creation stories when God creates human beings and says, "let us make them in our image". So what has God's image on it? Your heart, your soul, your very existence. When we give our heart to nation or to political party above God, then it's easy for us to twist our relationship with God to serve the things that we prize above him. That's how we get it wrong with politics, that's how we marry our faith to politics, and that's how we justify behavior that has no resemblance to Jesus...and that's when we get it wrong.

I hope that you have been stung a little bit today, because I have been stung by this message. See, I have issues with intolerance. I am intolerant of people who are intolerant! That's just how messed up I am. But it doesn't matter than I'm right about them being wrong! No matter how wrong they are to me, no matter how much they anger me, Ephesians 4 applies to me. The greater mission than being right, the greater mission than republican or democrat, the mission that matters most if God is above everything else, is to let God's love shine through me.

So the next time you are engaged in a political activity or debate or the next time you are tempted to forward some email or say something a bit slanderous, I'd like to invite you to ask one question...whose image do I want people to see first in me (image of elephant, donkey or the cross)?

We do not proclaim a gospel of big government or small government; We do not proclaim a gospel of guns or no guns; We do not proclaim a gospel of pro-life or pro-choice. As Christians, I hope your faith informs your politics and you are free to engage in those and other debates in ways that represent Jesus well. The gospel we proclaim is the good news of Jesus and the personal, redeeming relationship that this risen savior offer us. AND THAT'S GOOD NEWS!