Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Politically Incorrect?
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: A222

If you came thinking I'm going to tell you how to vote this year, or suggest ways to mobilize your people to sway elections in your home town, you are probably going to be disappointed. In fact, those of you who know anything about me might be surprised that I'm even dealing with a topic like this one. I was frankly surprised when the guys who organize these seminars assigned me this session. Election-year politics are not really my cup of tea. And I don't mean I'm not interested in the subject. I mean that I purposely try to keep my distance from it.

There's a good reason for that. Before I became a Christian, I was a hard-core, obsessive political activist. Throughout my high-school years, I thought I wanted to be either a politician or a newspaper pundit when I grew up. That was my highest worldly aspiration, and the political power-struggle was the single, central, driving interest of my life. But when I became a Christian, I gave that passion up for something infinitely better—something of eternal value: the gospel of Christ.

I won't give you my whole testimony about that. It's on an audio-recording of one of my sermons somewhere downloadable from the Internet. But the short version is that from the night of my conversion until today, I have deliberately steered clear of partisan politics in the same way most of you would try to steer clear of pornography or recreational drugs. Because in my own experience as an unregenerate person, party politics represented that same kind of addiction. In fact, it was the very first worldly fixation I set aside when I became a Christian—because it struck me almost from the outset that an obsession with earthly power and political ideology is basically an addiction to the wisdom of this world, which is foolishness with God.

That's not to suggest that I'm naturally apathetic about politics. To this day, I know that if I listened to a steady diet of Rush Limbaugh or Ann Coulter, I would begin to feel rising fits of those same old political passions. But political activism was so much of an idol in my old, pre-Christian life that today I think of it in pretty much the same way the apostle Paul said he regarded his former life as a Pharisee: I count it as dung. I've relegated those passions to the rubbish heap of things I count as loss, "In order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

Some of you are probably already thinking that sounds pretty harsh. If you are inclined to be a political activist yourself, you no doubt think I'm terribly short-sighted, or too much of an isolationist. I

hasten to say that I'm not suggesting there's anything inherently sinful about holding electoral office or doing public service. If it's your calling to be mayor of your town or a congressman from your district, you'll get nothing but encouragement from me as long as you seek to fulfill that task to the glory of Christ. But you need to do that not merely by flexing your power, but mainly by being a consistent example of Christlike service and humility. Of course, that's just what every Christian in the secular workplace should endeavor to do. In the words of 1 Timothy 4:12, "in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe."

I thank God for Christians whose vocation is to serve faithfully in our government—including those elected officials who are devoted Christians. But let's be clear, here: that's a different vocation from the calling of a pastor. And I am speaking to you as pastors and church leaders: It's well-nigh impossible to be a good pastor full time if you also fancy yourself a political lobbyist.

We need to remember that political clout has nothing whatsoever to do with spiritual power. Study the priorities for the church in the New Testament; look at the duties Scripture outlines for shepherds of the flock. You'll find no mandate to press the government for legislation on moral issues. In fact, what you'll see is that jockeying for political clout is one of the very strategies Jesus named as worldly methods that are not to characterize leadership in His kingdom. He said His kingdom is permanently set apart from every earthly dominion because Christ's kingdom is advanced by humble service rather than through the kind of political strategies that depend on the exercise of human authority.

I'll show you that in a moment, but first I want to stress this: Nothing in the past half century has done more damage to the evangelical cause than the notion that the best way for Christians to influence society is by wielding our collective political clout. If you think the most important answer to the ills of our society is a legislative remedy; if you imagine that political activism is the most effective way for the church to influence culture; or if you suppose the church is going to win the world for Christ by lobbying in the halls of Congress and by rallying Christians to vote for this or that type of legislation—then both your trust and your priorities are misplaced.

Personally, I think the tendency to seek legislative remedies for every social ill is one of the absolute worst tendencies of contemporary secular society, and it disturbs me greatly to see Christians more or less follow that pattern blindly. To borrow a thought from the title of John MacArthur's least-popular book ever, Government Cannot Save Us. The only power that can truly and permanently rescue human society from its own spiritual ills is the transforming power of gospel of Jesus Christ. And that happens through the regeneration of individual human hearts, right? We need to remind ourselves of that fact often, and put more of our energies into the task of evangelism.

We are pastors and church leaders who formally and confessionally recognize the authority of Scripture. Practically the worst kind of spiritual treason we could ever commit would be to supplant the gospel message with a different message, or to allow an earthly agenda to crowd out our spiritual

duties. That is exactly the risk we take when we pour money and resources into political and legislative remedies for our society's spiritual problems.

In 2008 America saw one of the most hotly contested presidential elections ever. For the first time in more than two decades, the so-called religious right had no clear-cut favorite choice in the primaries. By the time the two major parties finally chose their candidates, neither of the leading presidential nominees had credibly expressed any distinctly evangelical convictions. In fact, I think it would be fair to say both parties chose men who were basically secular humanists (though, obviously, one was more liberal than the other). Before he threw his hat into the presidential race, the Republican candidate was wobbly on the issues of abortion and same-sex unions—and he had repeatedly made it clear that he didn't share the passions of evangelical voters. He once referred to evangelical Republicans as "agents of intolerance." Though he softened that stance during the race and even chose a running mate known for her evangelical convictions, the ticket was still hardly representative of the priorities evangelical voters had long fought for.

Now, consider the bitter irony of this: For more than two decades the number-one issue on the agenda of the evangelical wing of the religious right has been abortion. The number-one legislative goal of evangelical political activists has been to overturn Roe vs. Wade, the Supreme Court ruling that effectively legalized abortion. Politically-active evangelicals have been instrumental—in fact, they have been the decisive factor—in the election of every Republican president from Ronald Reagan until now. And yet not only have they failed to achieve their single most-coveted political goal, but they are now approaching a presidential election without a single viable candidate who shares their views.

And meanwhile, if anything, America's moral decline has accelerated dramatically since evangelicals became politically aggressive in the late 1970s. Although by most accounts evangelicals constitute the largest single voting bloc in America, they have been remarkably ineffective when it comes to using politics to reverse America's moral and spiritual decline. In fact, if you measure their success or failure according to their own stated political ambitions, evangelicals have failed spectacularly in America's political arena. Over the past quarter-century, they have not accomplished any of their long-term legislative or constitutional goals.

Worst of all, during that same period of time, the evangelical movement has completely lost its spiritual influence, because the evangelical segment of the church has grown increasingly worldly. Evangelicals have become accustomed to compromise. They have abandoned (or else are in the process of abandoning) virtually all the doctrinal distinctives that made them distinct from Roman Catholics and nominal Christians whose faith amounts to a kind of civil religion. Evangelicals have pretty much forfeited whatever real moral and spiritual authority their movement ever had.

Consider the fact that almost no one in the evangelical world had more political savvy than Ted Haggard, the now-discredited president of the National Association of Evangelicals. He actually advised the White House on evangelical issues. Before his fall from grace, The Wall Street Journal called him “one of the nation’s most politically influential” ministers in America, and Harper’s Magazine said this about him: “No pastor in America holds more sway over the political direction of evangelicalism than does Pastor Ted.” But whatever his accomplishments in the political arena, by his own admission Ted Haggard was a liar and a fraud in his private life.

I’m not suggesting that political activism is what made Ted Haggard a hypocrite, nor am I saying that he is typical of everyone in the mainstream of evangelical politics. I certainly hope he was a singular case.

But I am suggesting that any religious organization that’s more concerned with political expediency than with biblical truth is by definition following the error of the Pharisees and will breed the grossest kind of hypocrisy. (I’m also suggesting that if the National Association of Evangelicals had been more concerned about their leaders’ spiritual qualifications and less enamored with worldly skills like personal charisma and political shrewdness, they would never have had Ted Haggard as their president. He had never really distinguished himself in any of the biblical categories the apostle Paul outlined as qualifications for an elder. His one qualification was his mastery of the political process.)

And let’s face it, brethren: Whether we like it or not, in the eyes of an observant world, Ted Haggard seems like a perfect mascot for the evangelical right.

Despite our outspokenness on selected issues in the political realm, American evangelicals have sent a mixed and often flatly contradictory message to anyone who looks at the big picture. Evangelical pulpits are notoriously weak and shallow. Evangelical churches are lukewarm and worldly. Evangelical people as a community tend to be increasingly unholy and are now virtually indistinguishable in lifestyle and behavior from their non-Christian neighbors. Evangelical leaders on the whole seem more concerned with being stylish and admired than with being clear and consistent.

For more than a decade now we have been hearing poll data that suggest people who identify themselves as evangelicals are just as susceptible to divorce and alcohol addiction as their unbelieving neighbors—which can only mean that our church rolls are filled with unconverted people. In fact, just about the only significant difference remaining between evangelicals and unbelievers is how we vote. (And certain forces in the Emerging Church are doing all they can to bring the church in line with the world on that front, too.) No wonder the world hasn’t taken the evangelical wing of the religious right seriously. The evangelical movement hasn’t shown itself serious about what we profess to believe.

How did the evangelical movement get so far off track? I wouldn't suggest that evangelicalism's recent obsession with political activism is the only factor, but I do think it's a major one. If the same energies and resources that were poured into failed political efforts had been channeled into evangelism instead, I'm convinced that would have been instrumental in producing more spiritual good and hindering more of society's evils than all our lobbying, demonstrating, and voting combined.

In fact, it is my conviction that because they have invested so much in the political process, evangelicals have weakened their own movement with a tendency to compromise; we have sacrificed our evangelical distinctives, and we have gone far off message from the central truths of the gospel. Political activism has been a disaster for the American evangelical movement on every front. Not only have we completely failed at the political process; we have failed even more egregiously to remain distinct from the world.

And you men have within your power to help spark a reversal of that direction. That's what I want to challenge you with today.

Now, that's basically just a preface to my actual seminar, so that you know where I stand on the subject of evangelical political maneuvering. Three years ago, I wrote a chapter on this subject in the book Fool's Gold. The main point of that chapter was that when Jesus told His disciples they are like salt and light—and when He urged us to let our light shine—political activism was practically the furthest thing from what He was actually calling us to do. In fact, Christians are never guiltier of hiding their true light under a bushel than when they deliberately suppress the gospel message or downplay the exclusivity of Christ in order to form the kinds of political coalitions and ecumenical alliances that become expedient when someone is lobbying for a merely moral agenda.

For several weeks, people who know me have been asking me what I'm planning to say in this seminar. One guy e-mailed me and said he was looking forward to my "seminar on election" at the Shepherds' Conference. I don't know if he misread the brochure or if he was just being droll. But I have to admit that for one mischievous moment after this topic was assigned to me, I had the same idea. I thought about playing off the word election and talking about the sovereignty of God in salvation.

But in all seriousness, I'm glad for an opportunity to explore what Scripture says about the faithful shepherd's duty—and especially to consider whether and how that changes in a democratic society during an election year. It's an important question that I fear too many pastors haven't considered deeply enough.

I don't think this is a complex topic. I am absolutely convinced the shepherd's task is no different in an election year from any other year. Scripture is clear about this: "Preach the word…in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." That's 2 Timothy 4:2, and it is

more or less the key verse and main message you have heard in every Shepherds' Conference we've held at Grace Community Church for the past 25 years or longer.

My goal in this hour is to urge you to keep that priority firmly fixed in your focus, and I want to amplify it with four reminders from the New Testament. I'm going to look briefly at four passages that deal expressly with the question of how Christ's kingdom advances and how the truth of the gospel has its most powerful impact on the hearts and minds of unbelievers. Here are four elements of pastoral ministry that must be higher priorities to us than partisan politics. More specifically, these are four principles to remember if you want to be a faithful shepherd to your flock in an election year:

Preaching, not lobbying, is how we are supposed to make the truth known. Gospel, not law, is what changes sinful hearts. Service, not dominion, is the most effective way to win people in any culture. And Christ, not moralism, should be the primary substance of our message.

I'll repeat those several times along the way if you want to write them down, but let's spend as much time as we can looking at the relevant passages of Scripture that stress those principles, and let me show you why I'm suggesting these four aspects of our calling are essential in any biblical strategy of shepherding—but especially when an election year tempts us to turn our attention to worldly politics.

The first one is found in 1 Corinthians 1:21. Here is the principle:

1. PREACHING, NOT LOBBYING, IS HOW WE MAKE TRUTH KNOWN.

Preaching, not politicking, the main activity we are called to do in order to unleash God's truth into an ungodly society. As a matter of fact, this is the main point that dominates the first major section of 1 Corinthians. Chapter 1, verse 21, is Paul's proposition statement for that opening section of this epistle: "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."

That's the King James Version, and I started with that because it gives the most literal sense of the original. The New American Standard Version says, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." Notice that the King James Version seems to put the stress on the act of preaching; the New American Standard underscores the content of our preaching. Actually, the original text supports both ideas. A literal rendering of the Greek text would be something like this: "it pleased God through the foolishness of our proclamation to save the ones believing." Both the message we preach and the methodology of preaching seem like foolishness in the judgment of worldly wisdom. Both the strategy and the substance of gospel-preaching runs counter to what common sense might suggest is the best way to communicate truth to a sophisticated

society such as Paul found in the first-century Greek culture.

Likewise with ministry today. The conventional wisdom—worldly wisdom—tells us that if we want to get our point of view across in egalitarian America, we must do it through the democratic process. We need to campaign for candidates and lobby for legislation that reflect our point of view. We have got to harness the power of the Supreme Court and Congress and use them to halt the moral unravelling of our culture for Christ, or else we'll lose the culture war.

But preaching in the public square, not lobbying in the halls of Congress, is the biblical way—and the only truly effective way—Christ's church has always made His truth known. Incidentally, when Scripture speaks of "preaching" in a context like this, the reference is not exclusively—or even primarily—to a message given from the pulpit to a church congregation. Paul is speaking of every kind of gospel proclamation—evangelistic ministry—calling people to repentance. It would include even your private proclamation of the gospel to your neighbors. Everything from open-air preaching to one-on-one personal evangelism. Whatever the venue, it's speaking of the clear and emphatic proclamation of the gospel. That's the idea.

In short, Paul is contrasting the biblical strategy for evangelism with every other kind of strategy—especially those schemes that aim to win people by impressing them or entertaining them or seeking to gain their respect and admiration. The biblical strategy is simple and straightforward: we simply proclaim the truth as clearly as possible and call people to repentance. Everything else, Paul says, is wasted effort—even counterproductive. Listen to the way he carefully outlines the distinction. Notice how he starts chapter 2:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling,

4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

5 that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

And then he adds this in verse 8: "None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

Paul was proclaiming a truth that is incompatible with the political machinery of this world, and he said so as emphatically as possible. Rather than trim the message or try to shoehorn it into some existing

system of earthly philosophy, some worldly political scheme, or some pleasing format that would make it seem popular and appealing, Paul was determined to preach it plainly. And he did this even though the message was so counter-cultural in sophisticated Greek society that even the great apostle Paul said he struggled to preach “in weakness and in fear and much trembling.” It was no easier for him than it is for you and me to proclaim truth to a hostile culture.

Still, rather than trying to harness the political machinery, impress the philosophical academy, or get on board with the entertainment industry of his times in order to gain people’s admiration, Paul says he was determined to know nothing among the Corinthians other than the simple gospel message he was called to proclaim.

First Corinthians 2 is a definitive statement of this principle. Look down at verse 22: “The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom.” All right. If we follow the wisdom of modern church-growth experts, what do we do? We give the Jews a sign, and we preach wisdom to the Greeks. That is the very approach many people today try to follow. They usually don’t consciously and deliberately abandon the gospel, but they try to mold it and shape it so that it sounds like wisdom to people who are seeking a message with some philosophical or political sophistication.

But notice what the apostle Paul says: “But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness.” The Jews want a sign; we give them a stumblingblock. The Greeks want wisdom, we give them foolishness.

Now, why is this? Did Paul just want to be perverse? No. Keep reading: “We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

The gospel is the greatest sign of all, and it is the greatest wisdom of all unto them which are called. The elect will see it, even if no one else does. The gospel is “the power of God”—more potent than any cosmic sign. And it is “the wisdom of God”—wise enough to make all the wisdom of this world seem like mere foolishness by comparison.

But it only one class of people recognize the power and the wisdom of the gospel: “those who are called”—the elect. They are the ones who will respond to the gospel. But they will respond. Jesus said, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me” (John 6:37).

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Those who are called effectually by the Holy Spirit will recognize the wisdom and power of God in the gospel. That’s why we must proclaim this message, and not obscure it with our political rhetoric, philosophical arguments, and other useless forms of earthly wisdom.

What seems mere foolishness to the worldly mind is actually the only thing that can reach sinners and turn their hearts to Christ, because it is the wisdom and power of God. And (verse 25) “The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” That’s why the clear preaching of the gospel is infinitely superior to any political strategy or philosophical argument when it comes to reaching people and lifting them out of the bondage of sin.

That’s also why Paul’s one strategy was preaching—not politics, not diplomacy, not academic-style dialogue, and certainly not compromise for the sake of winning public accolades. But by that one strategy alone—preaching the gospel—he made an indelible impact on the Corinthian culture. Furthermore, even after that church was planted, he continued to employ that same strategy as the means by which he pastored the church of God.

That’s how to shepherd your flock in the midst of an election year: Stick to the message. Stay on point. Determine to know nothing but Christ crucified—and then make that message the heart and centerpiece of everything you preach.

Look once more at that key text, 1 Corinthians 1:21: “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of [our preaching] to save those who believe.” Pay attention to the pivotal phrase in the center of that verse: “the world through wisdom did not know God.” It is not possible to find God through the pursuit of worldly wisdom. That covers a lot of territory, including most of the missional strategies that are currently in vogue among evangelicals. Philosophy, politics, arts, and aesthetics—and every other kind of worldly wisdom—all of those are utterly devoid of any special power to transform a sinner into a saint. We could say the same thing about comedy, entertainment, yoga classes—and all the other gimmicks that are used to draw appreciative crowds without really teaching them any biblical truth.

There is only one thing that can give a sinner a new heart, and that is spiritual regeneration—the new birth. And the one true instrument of the new birth is the Word of God as it is applied by the Holy Spirit. According to 1 Peter 1:23, we are “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.” Jesus told His disciples in John 15:3, “Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.” Only the Word of God, and specifically the gospel message, has the power to transform unbelieving people’s hearts and change them at the very core of who they are. The gospel “is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Romans 1:16), and that is why the apostle Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ”—even though the gospel seems foolish and naive to those steeped in the wisdom of this world.

So neither society nor individuals can ever be redeemed (or even influenced for good) by worldly wisdom, and Christians are seriously deluded if they think the most important battles for

righteousness are being waged in the arenas of politics, education, entertainment, or the arts. Those are the realms of worldly wisdom, and worldly wisdom will never be an instrument for the advancement of Christ's kingdom. According to Luke 10:21, God has "hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes…for so it seemed good in [His] sight."

So to sum up: Clever amusements, pep rallies, educational programs, legislative agendas, political strategies, philosophical arguments, and all the Supreme Court rulings in the world will never turn sinners into Christians. All those things epitomize what Paul meant by worldly wisdom. They are the baggage of a carnal and utterly ineffectual strategy that will never reform a society like ours that is in love with sin. And the fact that such things consume so much evangelical energy today is a testimony to our unfaithfulness and the utter failure of the modern and postmodern evangelical movement.

God is pleased to save sinners through the clear proclamation of gospel truth. And that is what we ought to devote our resources and energy to if we want to have an impact on our culture. We have a clear mandate to proclaim the gospel as clearly, as accurately, as powerfully, and as often as we can. We have no mandate whatsoever to use any other strategy—especially a strategy that attempts to harness aspects of worldly wisdom for influence under the misguided belief that these are more powerful than the gospel itself to transform our culture.

That actually leads into principle number two:

2. GOSPEL, NOT LAW, IS WHAT CHANGES SINFUL HEARTS.

Turn now to Galatians 2:21, and notice the principle at the very end of that chapter: "I do not set aside the grace of God," Paul says. "For if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" Of course, he's talking in that context about the Old Testament law. He was battling the error of the Judaizers, who were teaching that legal obedience is the instrument of justification. If you're not circumcised, they said, you're not truly saved. If you're a Gentile who wants to become a Christian, you first need to become Jewish and obey all the ceremonial laws, because those things are necessary to make you truly righteous. The righteousness you need for salvation must be gained through your own obedience to the law. That's what the law was for, they taught—the law makes sinners righteous. It was a direct assault on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and the principle of sola fide. It was an implicit denial that faith is the instrument of justification, and it made the law instrumental instead.

Paul answered the error head on like this (Galatians 2:21): "If righteousness [can] come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." If righteousness could be brought about by legislation, the whole gospel would be superfluous. Look also at Galatians 3:21: "If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law."

Again, the point Paul is making in Galatians has to do with the law of Moses and its role in our salvation. The law was given to awaken us to our sin, to reveal the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and to eliminate every possible option for salvation other than the transforming grace of God. The law didn't lay out a way of salvation, because law is totally impotent when it comes to transforming human hearts.

And if that's true of Moses' law, which came directly from God, it is certainly true of earthly statutes that are the result of political wrangling and compromise. Law has its rightful place, and no righteous person would ever want to see a lawless society. But when it comes to the question of how Christians might transform an already evil society, the answer lies in proclaiming the gospel, not in campaigning for legislation.

American evangelicals, of all people, ought to understand that. Our history is full of failed forays into the political realm—various attempts to establish Christ's kingdom on earth by legislation, and efforts to impact society spiritually through political means—starting with the Puritan experiment in Massachusetts in the 1600s. They wanted to establish a society of believers governed by righteous laws which were enforced by magistrates who were mature church members, because they believed that would create an earthly paradise and (in the words of Matthew 5:14) a city set on a hill. But the sons and daughters of the original Puritans became so comfortable with the notion that they were keeping society righteous through righteous laws that they neglected to evangelize their own children. (Just like Old Testament Israel.) And within two generations, Puritan society was beset with the very same problems the original Puritans had left England to get away from—not to mention witch trials and religious persecution. Before much more than a century had passed, Unitarianism and Deism were more powerful religious forces in New England than Puritanism was.

Even the few limited or short-term political successes evangelicals have achieved in American history all turned out to be monstrous failures. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, practically the entire evangelical community in America used their clout to pass a constitutional amendment (the eighteenth amendment to the United States Constitution) making it illegal to manufacture, sell, or transport alcoholic beverages in America. Far from elevating the spiritual climate of America, prohibition unleashed a wave of organized crime like the country had never seen. Thirteen years later, the twenty-first amendment formally repealed the eighteenth, American society went on a binge from which it has yet to recover, and today drunkenness remains a massive social problem. I hope we realize by now that only the gospel offers a true solution to that problem.

Laws have their rightful place in restraining evil and punishing evildoers. Romans 13 recognizes that. Even in the hands of such an utterly wicked ruler as Nero, the mechanism of government still functions in that common-grace sense, to bring a measure of peace and order to society, even in a fallen, sin-cursed society. But if your true goal is really the transformation and redemption of the

culture—or more precisely, the salvation of individual sinners—law is not the proper tool for that; gospel is. And woe to churches and pastors who divert their energies and resources away from gospel ministry under the delusion that the best and most important way to fix society is through campaigning for a certain kind of legislation. It's not.

Some of you may be thinking, No one really believes political activism is a proper replacement for the gospel. Would anyone actually advocate the suppression of the gospel in favor of political lobbying? Actually, people do it all the time. There are Christian radio broadcasters who rarely talk about anything other than political controversy. Often their topics as well as the arguments they use are hardly any different from what you'd hear Rush Limbaugh or Sean Hannity say. Some of the best-known broadcasters in Christian radio fit that profile. You'll never hear them stress justification by faith, because Roman Catholic support is essential to the political coalition they hope to build, and they can't afford to alienate that segment of their audience. You're not likely to hear them stress the exclusivity of Christ or the absolute necessity of faith in Christ, either, because that would offend their Jewish allies. In practice, what they are saying when they do that is that they believe it's more vital to achieve a political and legislative solution to America's moral crisis than it is to proclaim the gospel clearly.

That, my brothers, is an absolute abdication of our calling as ambassadors of Christ. The message we're commanded to proclaim, and the theme of all our public ministry is summed up in four words in 2 Corinthians 5:20: "Be reconciled to God." We're first of all ambassadors; not political lobbyists or cultural jihadists. We are commissioned to proclaim the gospel, not merely law.

So preaching, not lobbying, is how we are supposed to make the truth known. Gospel, not law, is what changes sinful hearts. Here's a third principle, this one spelled out for us in careful detail by Christ Himself:

3. SERVICE, NOT DOMINION, IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO WIN PEOPLE IN ANY CULTURE.

Turn with me to Matthew 20:25–28. Here in this context, Jesus himself is addressing a question that closely parallels the question we're dealing with in this seminar: If we want to maximize our influence for the kingdom of Christ in our community, what's the best way to do it? If you want to be a great leader in Christ's kingdom and an effective undershepherd to His flock, what approach should you take?

Here's Jesus' answer: "Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise [dominion] over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first

must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"

There's both a negative and a positive aspect to that. Jesus is emphatic: we're not to seek greatness, or influence, or power in the kingdom of Christ by the raw exercise of authority over other people. He's talking specifically about governmental and legislative authority.

Now, let's be clear here: Jesus is not spurning the idea of legal authority or human government. We've already seen that Scripture recognizes and affirms the proper role of rulers. Romans 13 defines that role, and verse 4 expressly says that when a ruler properly wields the sword against evildoers, "he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

But here in this context Jesus was speaking to His apostles as representatives and leaders of His church and ambassadors for His kingdom. And He makes this clear differentiation between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Caesar. The two kingdoms are run with completely different principles—because they operate in totally separate arenas; they function with exactly opposite strategies; they are pursuing entirely different goals; and the way they leverage their power and influence is therefore likewise thoroughly and radically different.

To illustrate, it's clear from Romans 13 that the government is authorized by God to use force—up to and including deadly force and even capital punishment. Paul says it is both good and legitimate for earthly governments to wield their power—and even use the sword—to enforce submission to their rightful authority and to punish evildoers who deserve punishment. Romans 13:4 again: "He is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

But nowhere in all the New Testament is the church ever authorized to use the sword for any purpose—including the punishment of damnable heresy in her own midst. The most extreme remedy available to the church for punishing evildoers is excommunication.

Different kingdoms, different principles. And it would be a terrible sin for the church to overstep her bounds and employ any kind of force against heretics or evildoers, because she has no authority from God to do that.

By the same token, the church has no commission from God to harness the power of Caesar—even under a democratic regime—in order to attempt to advance the kingdom of Christ by legislative force or by any other kind of constraint. What Jesus was saying in this text (Matthew 20:25–28) forbids exactly that, in the most emphatic terms: "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise [dominion] over them. It shall not be so among you."

When Christian reconstructionism was having its heyday back in the mid-1990s, I sometimes encountered post-millennial theonomists who were convinced that the key to ushering in the kingdom of Christ on earth was for the church to gain dominion over ourculture and our government's public policy—chiefly through legal maneuvering and political means. They weren't merely saying, as I already have, that government service (or even a career in politics) is a legitimate and honorable vocation for individual Christians whom God places in those positions. They were teaching that political activism is the duty of the church as a corporate entity. They were in effect teaching that gaining and exercising political power is one of the most vital ingredients to the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

That flatly contradicts what Jesus Himself said in Matthew 20:25–26 ("the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion….But it shall not be so among you.") It also conflicts with the pattern of ministry in the New Testament church. Even Paul, who appealed his own case to Caesar, did so not with the hope he might influence Caesar's public policy (which, to be candid, was a thousand times more deplorable than anything the American Democratic party has proposed)—but Paul asked for a hearing in Rome because he longed for an opportunity to preach the gospel there. He was happy to go there in chains—not to protest the treatment he had received at the hands of Roman officials, but to preach to Caesar and his household the gospel of redemption.

That should be our spirit as well. I'd be thrilled if America ever elected a president who believed Scripture and followed its principles without compromise. But to be totally honest, I doubt that's possible in any democratic system. Furthermore, on those rare occasions when truly devoted, Bible-believing Christians have found themselves in possession of the reins of significant political power, they have almost always managed to make a mess of it. Will Durant wrote this about the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell:

"His private morals were impeccable, [but] his public morals were no better than those of other rulers; he used deception or force when he thought them necessary to his major purposes." And then Durant added this: "No one has yet reconciled Christianity with government."

The problem, I believe, is the very thing Jesus highlighted in Matthew 20: the kingdom of God is ultimately not advanced by the flexing of political clout.

If you want to shepherd your flock effectively in this election year, teach them by both precept and example to be servants rather than seeking to be rulers.

(Are you taking these points down?) Preaching, not lobbying, is how we are supposed to make the truth known. Gospel, not law, is what changes sinful hearts. And service, not dominion, is the most effective way to win people in any culture.

Here's a fourth principle, just briefly, and then I'll quit and open it up for your questions:

4. CHRIST, NOT MORALISM, SHOULD BE THE PRIMARY SUBSTANCE OF OUR MESSAGE

Listen: Our society is not going to be redeemed, or even influenced for good, by moralistic special pleading. The vast majority of the moralism we get from the religious right is lacking any clear reference to Christ or the gospel. It is devoid of any biblical authority, because it has been distilled into a purely political message it is frankly indistinguishable from the teaching of the Pharisees.

Back to 1 Corinthians 2:2. Paul tells the Corinthians "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Why would we preach the law except as a prelude to the gospel? And yet the nature of political discourse in America currently demands that if you want to have a voice, you have to eliminate the gospel. As I said earlier, when your political agenda requires political alliances with Moonies, Mormons, Moslems, Jehovah's Witnesses, and humanistic moralists, you simply cannot afford to speak frankly about the exclusivity of Christ. You have to stifle the truth about justification by faith alone, because Roman Catholics reject that doctrine. You are better off not to mention the name of Christ at all, because Jewish people are sensitive about that.

And as a consequence, the more determined Christians are to succeed in the political arena, the more they tend to trim away the offensive parts of the gospel. It is the natural and inevitable consequence of moving the fight to the political arena. Watch what happens when the average evangelical political pundit is asked in any secular forum whether he believes Jewish people or Hindus can go to heaven without conscious faith in Christ. If he's someone running for public office, he frankly can't afford to tell the truth about that issue.

And listen to evangelical activists in public, secular forums arguing against same-sex unions or gay-rights legislation. They'll bend over backward to make rational and philosophical arguments—while they assiduously avoid stating plainly that homosexuality is wrong because the Bible says it's wrong. That systematically knocks the foundation of biblical authority out from under the point we need to make. Think about it: we don't abstain from every appearance of evil just because it's pragmatically expedient or rationally sensible to do that. We do it because that's what God's Word says to do.

And when Christian politicians make moral arguments that are bereft of any appeal to Scripture—especially when they lean on rational, philosophical, and pragmatic arguments and deliberately downplay the authority of Scripture—what they are doing is actually counterproductive and detrimental to the Christian message.

This is not to minimize the importance of sound moral principles; but it puts them in their proper place—not as means by which our culture can be redeemed (morality is certainly not that); not as the ground or source of the righteousness that justifies us before God (that was the error of the Judaizers); but as something that adorns our doctrine and expresses the practical ramifications of what we believe about Christ. That's exactly what Paul said in Titus 2:1: "teach what accords with sound doctrine"—teach what reflects the beauty and glory of our doctrine. But remember that the whole point and the proper focus of our doctrine is Christ, not merely moralism.

Remember that we are agents and ambassadors of Christ's kingdom. Christ is the one proper subject and center of our message to a hostile world. Our first calling is to proclaim and glorify His name. And what He himself has commissioned us to do is inherently incompatible with the quest for earthly dominion through political force.

Preaching, not lobbying, is how we are supposed to make the truth known. Gospel, not law, is what changes sinful hearts. Service, not dominion, is the most effective way to win people in any culture. And Christ, not moralism, should be the primary substance of our message.

God forbids us to use fleshly weapons and worldly strategies to enforce moral standards on people. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal. Worldly wisdom and political strategies can never save either society or individuals. If you want to be a faithful shepherd, teach your people those things, especially when the secular media is tempting them to become obsessed with partisan politics.

Let me say this in closing: If the question of who wins the American presidential election this year would alter your shepherding strategy, then you don't have a very sound agenda. Whether our next president is John McCain or Barack Obama, it's highly unlikely that we'll find ourselves under a more hostile or more volatile political regime than Nero's Rome, which is where Paul ministered. Under those circumstances, Paul did exactly what we need to do: he preached the gospel in every possible venue. And the church flourished.

Think about it, and you'll realize that the advancement of Christ's kingdom has never depended on democracy or even basic civil liberties. Even in very recent history, the church in Eastern Europe and the Iron Curtain countries flourished and grew both large and strong even under communist persecution. But the church in free, democratic, postmodern Western Europe is for all practical purposes dead.

If our energies are so focused on defending our liberties that we neglect to make the gospel clear, we'll lose our liberty anyway, along with the influence of the gospel. That is precisely what has been happening in America in the past half-century. It's time the church woke up to that fact.

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