

FAQs on Politics and Christian Faith
Charles Drew v06

THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

1) Does the “spirituality of the church” mean that we should not be involved in politics?

Summary response: Yes and no, depending on what we mean by “spirituality” and what we mean by “the church”.

Historical note: The term “spirituality of the church” is associated with James Henley Thornwell (1812-1862) a Presbyterian theologian and teacher who used it in the debate over what stance the church should take toward slavery. In his view the church’s “Constitution” is the Bible and where the Bible is silent (as, many alleged, it was regarding slavery), the church should be silent, making both keeping slaves and abstaining from holding them a matter of conscience. Dr. Thornwell maintained that “the power of the church... is only ministerial and declarative”, meaning that the church cares for people and declares God’s truth, but has no jurisdiction over political and social matters: “...the church has no commission to construct society afresh...to rearrange the distribution of its classes, or to change the forms of its political constitutions.”

Spirituality:

Dr. Thornwell strikes me as being partly right about the spirituality of the church. He is right that we may not identify the church with political agencies and political solutions or use the church to enforce them. This is so for multiple reasons. One is that political agencies and political solutions are fallible human efforts to make society better, and the church may not employ its moral authority to advance such solutions. To do so is to bind human consciences where the Bible is silent. A second reason is that the church is universal (made up of “every tribe and nation”) and her Lord rules over all (Jesus is neither a Democrat or a Republican—or an American for that matter). For the church to back any particular political solution is to reduce the glory of Christ by making him a partisan, and it is to exclude or make second class Christians of people who do not back that solution—people whom Jesus welcomes because of their faith in him. A third reason is that the church’s essential MO is gospel based transformation (from the “inside out” by the cross and Spirit) and political MOs are different—essentially seeking to implement

moral and social improvement by force (from the “outside in”). “Outside in” stuff may still have to happen since our world is still fallen— but the state, and not the church, is God’s chosen agency for that sort of undertaking (See Romans 13:1-4).

When in 1861 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America resolved that all its pastors should “profess [their] unabated loyalty” to the “Constitution in all its provisions, requirements, and principles,” and should “uphold . . . the Federal Government in the exercise of all its functions under our noble Constitution” (a resolution arising from an overture by Gardiner Spring, pastor of Brick Church in NYC), they violated the spirituality of the church. Jesus was no more a Federal Union man than he was a Confederacy man, and for the church to require of its ministers allegiance to the United States was to go beyond the requirements of Scripture. The scores of southern churches who left the denomination over that proposal were not unjustified in doing so. The GA would have been on much firmer ground if they had gone directly after slavery, making the case that slavery was a moral, rather than (as many alleged) a merely political, issue.

But Dr. Thornwell’s notion of “spirituality” is lacking.

“Spiritual” in the New Testament does not mean “other worldly” —or irrelevant to social and political realities in this world. It means “of the Spirit” and the Spirit is the Spirit of the age to come (“*in the latter days I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh*”— *Acts 2:17*). And the church, who possesses the Spirit as the “*guarantee*” (the “arrabon” or down-payment) *of our inheritance*” (*Eph 1:14*) is, therefore, the people of the future. We are God’s outpost in the present time—the foretaste and advocate of the social reality that will one day be when “*the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea*” (*Isaiah 11*). That social world, we all know from Scripture, will be one without tears, a single humanity enjoying God and living together in peace, love, honor, and goodness. To believe in the “spirituality of the church” is, therefore, to do all that we can as the church to approximate that world now, in the present world order. Our methods are not those of this world: we use prayer, proclamation, and loving service. But our goal will be transformation of this world at every level—from the individual person to the trans-national relationship. How can this not be the case when we call Jesus the Second Adam who has come to “*make all things new*” (*Revelation 21*)?

The church:

If by “the church” we mean the church as an institution, expressing herself through her preaching ministry and mandated group engagements, then the church should not be involved in politics. The church may not, in Jesus’ name, bind its people’s consciences by telling them how to vote, what party to belong to, and which legislation to seek to advance.

If by “the church”, however, we mean individual Christians living their lives out in this world, then the church must be involved in politics, for we are all called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Different Christians will inevitably be involved in different ways and to different degrees, according to their gifts, callings, and individual consciences. The institutional church (church in the first sense) will encourage them to be so, and will seek to protect them from each other by not making second class Christians out of anyone on the basis of their political involvements.

2) Should we seek to put our moral values into law?

Perhaps, but it must be done so carefully, humbly, and with limits. Law is a blunt instrument. Scoundrels can nearly always find their way around it (there is no way to write laws that cover every contingency). And the weak and innocent are often hurt by its unintended consequences. What is more, some of our values (say, “Love the Lord your God with all your strength”) are beyond the reach of what any law could enforce. We are, therefore, naïve when we allow ourselves to get too worked up over whether a certain law gets passed or not. What changes a people most deeply for the better is self-policing arising out of a sound and internalized moral vision, not force of law.

But to say we must never make laws that give expression to what we value would be a mistake. It fails to note that everybody legislates their values: law is the codification of what people hold to be important. So why shouldn’t Christians be free to do what everybody else does—within the limits of wisdom?

What then are the limits of wisdom? We probe them when we ask, “Which morals should we seek to turn into law and why?”

Some suggestions for the sorts of laws we should seek to advance:

- Laws that promote the common good: laws against stealing, murder, rape, the abuse of power, the binding of the conscience, and laws against the privileging of particular religions (say Sunday Sabbath laws, which privilege Christians but make life hard for Jews and Muslims: I never felt this as a

problem until I visited Bangladesh and found myself having to worship on Friday since that was the customary day off for that Muslim nation).

- Laws that enhance, rather than inhibit, the mission of the church. This is where laws prohibiting gay marriage posed an interesting problem only a short time ago. When, in our setting, we push hard for laws prohibiting gay marriage, or gay participation in public life (say buying a wedding cake from a person who has scruples with one's decision to enter a same-sex marriage), we can effectively seal ourselves off from genuine contact with gay friends and relatives (who are steadily growing in number). When, to speak positively, we promote laws that seek to inhibit the effects of climate change, we are likely to find ourselves partnering with many who would have no reason otherwise to know or listen us.
- Laws that are effective in our context: Prohibition was not effective and had the pernicious effect of fueling organized crime. Criminalizing the use of certain drugs does not necessarily reduce drug usage and it has had the pernicious effect of imprisoning disproportionate numbers of black and poor people, subjecting them to the criminalizing effects of living in the prison system. Laws against consensual sodomy and gay marriage are difficult to enforce and make little sense to increasing numbers of people in our post Christian, pluralistic and secular context. If Christians want to see those behaviors reduced, the legal route is likely not the most effective one.

3) Should the pulpit be used for political purposes? Why or why not?

Yes and no.

Generally no. The pulpit is the place to proclaim God's moral principles but not to endorse the flawed strategies of people. The pulpit must both proclaim God's law and defend the conscience of its people where the law of God is silent—and God's Word does not mandate particular strategies.

Yes—if used to urge people to meet their obligation in a democracy to be informed, to be involved, and to vote.

4) Do you have any hunches about currently accepted views or practices that the Body of Christ will feel the need to repent of in the future?

Yes.

One is our highly politicized Christianity. For evangelicals this has largely, though not exclusively, taken the form of cozying up

too much to Republican politics.

A second is ugly polarization within our own ranks. Churches that mirror the cultural divide around them fail to offer the sort of honest and safe community that people long for, without which intellectual arguments for the truth of the gospel do not carry much weight.

A third is our seeming indifference to two enormous problems of our time, namely, (1) climate change and (2) racism, especially in its enculturated and institutionalized forms.

In general we will likely be indicted for our lack of engagement with our secular friends and enemies—for our isolation from friends, colleagues, and neighbors whose politics and life-styles do not appeal to us. We will be indicted for our failure, in other words, to follow Jesus in “incarnational” living—finding ways of being genuine friends with our secular friends and institutions without swallowing their values where those values are at odds with those of Christ.

5) You say that “the freedom of every conscience is a Christian principle worth fighting for.” Are there no limits on the freedom of the conscience? What about the person whose conscience tells him to bomb an abortion clinic? Or the person whose conscience tells him to burn a federal building in protest against 400 years of federally sanctioned racism?

Yes there are limits to freedom of conscience. That limit is violence to my neighbor’s life, property, and freedom. Only the state (police, magistrates, duly commissioned armies), operating under the rule of law, may do violence to my neighbor (or me).

Paul writes of this: “governing authorities...[do] not bear the sword in vain” (Romans 13).

WEIGHING PARTIES, CANDIDATES, AND ISSUES

6) Should we support certain candidates because they represent the “lesser of two evils”, even if we don’t agree completely with their views?

We may find ourselves having to resort to the “lesser of two evils” argument at times, but it is a difficult tool for making a judgment. Evils of character can be more consequential than evils of policy, for an evil candidate is often only interested in power and is likely to abandon a policy he championed as a candidate whenever he finds it to be inconvenient once he is an elected official (*Proverbs 28:12-16* pronounces doom on a nation

whose rulers are godless). But if we choose character over policy, we are still left having to judge character—which is difficult, even if not impossible (*“by their fruits you will know them”*). No human being has pure motives. And even if we are certain about the good character of someone, we may conclude that he does know what he is doing, or that her policy is so pernicious to our country’s happiness that, however much we respect her, we cannot vote for her.

7) What value should I give to a candidate's faith in the campaigning and election process?

A candidate’s faith is not a very helpful measure when it comes to deciding whether or not to vote for him or her, for the following reasons: (1) It tells us very little about his/her political skill (would you choose a person to operate on you, first and foremost, because she is a Christian, or first and foremost because she is a good surgeon); (2) It tells us nothing about the relevance of that person’s faith to the rest of his or her life (it is very easy to profess faith in order to get votes, rather than because faith has any genuine impact on one’s life); (3) Even if a candidate is conscientious about applying his or her faith to life and policies, there is no guarantee that we will agree with his or her political strategy for doing good.

8) Should we support a certain party because it represents “the lesser of two evils”, even if we don’t completely agree with its views?

Each party represents a “cluster” of goods and evils. There is nothing wrong with trying to weigh things out, but it is very difficult. We will likely need to talk with friends to be sure we understand what is ethically at stake in each element of each cluster; we will need as well to search our hearts to be sure that we are not being driven by unsavory motives in the decisions we make. In the end, we ought to give the whole process our best shot, humbly, both because we cannot see everything and because we are sinners. Paul tells us to *“work out our salvation with fear and trembling”* (for our decisions are not fully informed or purely motivated), but to do so with hope and trust, *“for God is at work in us to will and to work according to his good purposes (Phil 2).*

We have to be patient with the imperfections in our political system and choices. For one thing, no candidate or party will ever hold all the views that any of us has, and (conversely) it is hard to imagine a party or candidate that does not share my views on at least something. Secondly, politics is complicated by the

difference between moral principle and political strategy: A party or candidate may agree with me in principle but disagree with me on the best way to get there. Whenever I “pull the lever” in a voting booth, I am wielding an extremely blunt instrument: I am inevitably voting for some things that I believe are right and some things that I believe are wrong. The only way to avoid ambiguity and disappointment in our political system is to withdraw, and withdrawal is hard to justify in a democracy where I am in some small way responsible for the government.

9) Is it wrong to be a one issue voter?

In most cases, yes, though it is important not to be absolutist about this. It may be that a particular issue has so gripped a person’s conscience that addressing it politically outweighs addressing every other. The Lord gives great weight to the conscience (*Romans 14: Whatever is not done in faith is sin*). We may need to train it with the help of friends who can help us to see the weight of other issues, but we must always honor it. The importance of the conscience is one of the chief reasons for why we tend to choose differently in politics and for why we need to respect each other in our choices once all the arguing is done. See the answer to (17) below for a fuller response.

10) Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees for ignoring the *weightier matters of the law* (Mt 23:23). Are there not weightier issues that should tip the scales in our political choices and advocacy? Shouldn’t, for example, defense for the unborn matter more to us than resisting climate change?

There is nothing wrong with permitting the burdens that we feel regarding certain issues to influence our political decisions. But we ought not to allow those burdens to make us indifferent to other moral concerns, nor should we universalize our burdens, making second class Christians of those who do not share them. Consider the following:

- **Jesus did people for ignoring the *weightier matters of the law*, but by that term he meant the heart of the law.**

Jesus tells us that “*justice, mercy, and faithfulness*” are weightier than certain tithing regulations (see *Mt. 23:23*), but he does so because justice, mercy, and faithfulness summarize the Law (love God and love your neighbor). Jesus never pits one application of that law against another (say, caring for the unborn and caring for the mother of the unborn who cannot afford to bring her child into the world). And this makes sense

given *James 2:10*, where we read that to break any part of the law is to break the whole: *For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*

- **God wants us to love the whole law, and if we do, we will find it hard to be “all in” with any one issue or with any particular political party.**

Single issue voting fails to take to heart that we must be concerned with the whole of God's law, not just a part of it.

“Man...lives by every word that comes out of the mouth of God” (Dt. 8:3).

A valuable exercise is to study the two Great Commandments (love God with all you've got and love your neighbor as yourself) looking for the ways that they affirm and challenge the values and behavior of both the political left and the political right. To love your neighbor is to be loyal to tradition and community (often strong values for conservatives) and to be protective of the rights and freedoms of the individual (often a strong value for liberals). At the same time the command to love God first and foremost challenges all parties in those very areas: It challenges conservatives not to make loyalty to tradition and community absolute and it challenges liberals not to make the freedom of the individual absolute. Loving God and neighbor will challenge lying and half-truths with convicting implications for how everybody (on the left and the right) does politics.

Author Dick Keyes asks:

“What if Evangelical Christians, who are meant to believe the *whole* Bible, would challenge themselves and one another to expand their political vision to the *full* range of Biblical morality? This would mean not cherry picking what our confirmation biases make familiar and comfortable on the one hand, and odious and condemnable on the other -- but the whole counsel of God. The word of God says that it is able to cut through even the confirmation biases of mature Christian people. Do we believe that? “(See lecture by Dick Keyes, Jan 31, 2020: Go to labrisouthborough.podbean.com; scroll down to “Can Christian people hope to have a redemptive influence in the polarization of American politics”. See also Justin Giboney and his “And Campaign”)

- **Even if, given particular circumstances, certain matters of God's law rise to prominence in the public discussion (say**

racism in 2020 or abortion at an earlier time and again in 2024), we will need to be careful not to equate God’s law with political laws and strategies. The weight of some element in God’s law will not, in other words, tell us how to vote or precisely how to advocate.

Political solutions are best understood as “human traditions” and are for that reason intrinsically fallible: Jesus warns us not to elevate them to the level of Scripture. We may find such traditions as more or less useful, or more or less consistent with Scripture, but they are never God’s perfect solution. They are limited (leaving important things out), they may have pernicious unintended consequences, and they might at times even run contrary to God’s Law (see *Mark 7:9-12* quoted below). By promoting them, and by choosing to give some of them more weight than others, we are not with any certainty advancing God’s cause; we are simply, and humbly, doing the best we can, with imperfect knowledge and fallible strategies, to nudge things in the right direction.

"You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'¹¹ But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God)-¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother,¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. (Mark 7:9-13)

Consider, by way of illustration, some of the imperfections of political solutions:

- Ignoring the problem of climate change in order to protect today’s unborn child, for example, only increases the likelihood that future generations of children, born and unborn, will perish for lack of food and water.
 - Electing a “prolife” candidate does not in itself guarantee that children rescued by pro-life legislation will survive: such legislation may be more “pro-birth” than anything else, giving little practical attention to the ongoing well-being of either the mother or the child once the birth happens.
 - Pouring money into some social welfare programs, for another example, can actually decrease social welfare by incentivizing some women who are ill-equipped to raise children to increase the size of their families.
- **We must be careful not to universalize our particular burdens.**

We will each inevitably feel a sense of burden about certain issues, and that is fine. Our sense of burden rises from our God-given experience, experience which makes us more alert

to certain data points and less alert to others. We rightly welcome and listen to that sense of burden as a likely part of God's calling on us as individuals. But we will need not to make the mistake of confusing our sense of calling with a mandate from God for every believer—or for our children or our parents.

Story:

I heard an 80 year old African American bishop from SC being interviewed on who he was going to vote for shortly before the SC primary in 2020. He said Joe Biden and when asked why, he spoke of being born in 1944 in rural SC and having to walk 5 miles each way to school every day because the district chose not to provide busses for black kids. He spoke of a baby brother dying in his father's arms as the father sought to walk the ten miles to the nearest hospital since no ambulance would come to fetch his child. His choice of Biden arises not just from Biden's policies but from a conviction that Biden understands and cares about his experience as a black man growing up in rural SC. Noting this does not cast aspersions on the man's political choice, but simply points out that political burdens are never purely objective for anybody -- never purely directives from God on what is right for everyone. They arise out of our "tribe" and our experiences.

One very useful and illuminating exercise is to make friends with people, especially Christian people, whose life experiences are different from ours. Doing this will increase our awareness of valid data points that we would otherwise miss.

ENGAGING PEOPLE GENERALLY

11) How do I respond when someone uses a moral principle as a conversation stopping battering ram: Say, “That policy is racist and abhorrent to God!!”

Sometimes there is very little that you can do, if the other person is worked up. If there is emotional room for discussion, it may help to try defining terms. “Racist” and “sexist” are loaded terms, carrying a range of ideas and an enormous amount of experience.

As long as their precise meaning in any given context remains undisclosed, we will often find ourselves talking past each other.

Such terms can also be veiled attacks: “That policy is racist” can functionally mean, “You are racist for entertaining that policy.”

In such circumstances, not even defining terms can be very useful. Sometimes we just have to walk away. Remember

Proverbs 15.1: A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

12) How do we engage with people of different political perspectives constructively?

We talk to them, one-on-one, in non-politicized settings. We listen to their stories in an effort to understand why they believe as they do. We look for common ground and work together wherever we can. We care. In the context of a genuine friendship we can find the setting to speak our mind. But even then, we do not have to win. That is Jesus' business.

ENGAGING FELLOW BELIEVERS

13) You speak about the importance of making a distinction in our political thinking between moral principles (which we ought all to espouse) and political strategies (which we ought to be free to disagree about with each other). What do I do when a believing friend claims as an inviolable Biblical principle something that the Bible does not in fact support?

This is an increasingly likely problem in a world where growing numbers of Christians do not know their Bibles very well. Start with humility: be genuinely open to learning and correction. You may not in fact know the Bible as well as you thought, and your friend's experience and background may have given them insight that you need. Then, go with them to the Bible: Scripture is after all our source book and authority as Christians. Ask your friend to help you understand how the Bible supports what they are alleging. If the two of you get stuck on a thorny interpretive problem (say, the relevance of an Old Testament regulation for our lives now that Jesus has come), seek some help together from someone who may know the Bible better than the two of you.

Along the way, try hard to understand your friend's story: very often certain values can mistakenly take on the status of Bible mandates because of some trauma or formative influence in one's life. Along the way, look hard for, and identify, ways in which your friend's moral principle echoes or grows out of ideas that you yourself find to be sound biblically: look, in other words, for agreement wherever possible. In the end, agree to disagree if necessary and pray for one another.

14) How do I respond when I detect the “nationalist idol” (described with nuance and fullness by Paul Miller—see the bibliography) in a Christian friend—when, in other words, it

seems that my friend's only concern is for America's (often White America's) prominence, prosperity, dominance and safety?

Choose the right time and place to speak to your friend: it is usually wise to speak privately and when there is enough time for substantial back and forth. Begin with a humble and gentle inquiry aimed at trying to understand what your friend is really thinking and why. You might actually be wrong in your assessment. What is more, you will in all likelihood need to understand your friend's back-story better: such understanding could temper any challenge you may need to bring with compassion and insight. Your friend might be so gung-ho about America (or some particular grouping of Americans), for example, because he has lost a family member in a terrorist attack or in a foreign war, or because he lost his job to someone from a different race. Or he may be an immigrant whose experience of the immigration process and benefits has been very positive. Pray before you engage your friend, remembering that idols, yours included, or often so deeply embedded that only a miracle can expose and uproot them. Ask the Lord to search your own heart, knowing that we tend to be most reactive to those who are in certain ways like us. Read and pray through *Romans 12:9-21* before you meet. Be prepared to walk away if the conversation proves useless and infuriating. You are responsible to "*speak the truth in love*" (*Eph. 4:15*) and to do what you can to "*be at peace with all people*" (*Rom. 12:18*); but we are not responsible for changing anyone.

ENGAGING THE UNBELIEVING CULTURE

15) How can Christians be faithful to their biblical ethics without seeming exclusive and judgmental towards those whose life choices go against what the Bible teaches?

On the one hand this is often inescapable. God wants us to live certain sorts of lives and our friends might construe our efforts to do so as judgmental. On the other hand, we can make matters worse by being smug, isolated, and condemning. In *1 Cor. 5* Paul tells his readers to put their house in order by dealing with a professing believer who is sleeping with his mother-in-law. But he goes on to say that this is "in house" stuff and that we need not to be sitting in judgment of those who are outside the church.

Paul says that they are God's business, not ours. In our pluralistic and (often) post-Christian world it is not only wrong, but ineffective to be sitting in judgment of our secular neighbors.

We would be wiser to deal with our own sin (even if its expression is in different areas than that of our neighbors), while bending over backwards to welcome our neighbors. A helpful exercise is to invite our secular friends to tell us of the off-putting hypocrisies that they see in Christian people. Conversations of this sort can both build bridges and bring conviction to us about changes we need to make.

16) Do you have any ground rules for engaging unbelieving friends and relatives who are filled with political anger?

Four ground rules come to mind.

First, listen. A rabbi somewhere wrote, “The good Lord has given us two ears and one mouth so that we will listen at least twice as much as we speak.” Rarely are angry friends and relatives ready to listen to an argument raised in opposition to their point of view.

The best way to get them (eventually) to listen is to take the lead in listening ourselves.

Second, watch your tone. *Proverbs 15.1-2* advises us well: *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. ² The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly.*

Third, walk away when you have to. Jesus was getting at this when he said, “*Don’t cast your pearls before swine.*” (*Matthew 7:6*) By using such a shocking term Jesus does not ask us to despise people (he never despised anyone). He is simply pointing out that there can come a time in a discussion when we may as well be talking with pigs. Arguments, however strong and valuable, are of no use. And so, we walk away, either literally or by shifting the conversation.

Fourth, pray. Jeremiah asked, “*Can the leopard change his spots?*” (*13:23*) to make vivid that God alone can shift the attitudes of our hearts. And so, we pray for change.

17) How as people of biblical conviction do we live in a culture that is committed to religious and ethical pluralism?

Believers have a right and responsibility to resist when cultural pluralism is used as an argument to inhibit the free exercise of their faith. Jesus is Lord, and he wants people to be uninhibited in their approach to him. Pluralism itself, properly understood, gives believers grounds for the free exercise of their faith: if pluralism acknowledges the presence and right of Muslim, or even atheist, expression, then it acknowledges the presence and the right of Christian expression as well. Gatherings for Bible study and worship in a public school after hours are as defensible as are gatherings for any number of other purposes.

The challenge for Christians is to be even-handed in their advocacy of religious freedom. The freedom of *every* conscience is a Christian principle worth fighting for—not just for pluralism’s sake but as a matter of biblical conviction: Jesus is uninterested in coerced followers. We will, for that reason, champion building a mosque at ground zero in NYC as vigorously as we champion our right to have Christian worship in a public school after hours. We will, in other words, be advocates of the political Golden Rule when it comes to religious expression: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

What does Christian “even-handedness” mean with respect not simply to worship, but with respect to certain “religious freedom” laws? Should Christians fight for laws that protect the freedom of a Christian baker not to sell a wedding cake to a same-sex couple?

What of the freedom of the same-sex couple to live out their convictions? Should Christians fight against gender-neutral bathrooms in public schools? What of the freedom of LGBT and trans people to live out their convictions?

It is difficult to answer these questions with moral certainty. We should talk them through humbly with each other and with gay friends. Perhaps there are different legitimate answers to the two examples cited. Certainly the answers ought not to be driven by fear (“*God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control*”—2 Timothy 1.7). We would do well to ask, remembering that evangelism is as much a matter of biblical obligation as is Christian sexual ethics, “What sorts of political solutions will enhance our mission to friends who live in a post-Christian world?” We would do well to ask, as well, “How might the Golden Rule” apply in our advocacy of those solutions?”

18) How do we graciously and respectfully engage in political conversations with friends who ignore spiritual realities?

It helps to admit that we have largely lost the culture war (more or less so in different parts of the country). On the one hand, this is very hard for many of us to face. On the other hand, it is a great opportunity to return to a simpler (and in many ways more challenging) form of cultural influence—one in which we seek to persuade by the quality of our arguments, the quality of our lives as individuals, and the quality of our fellowship as churches. We are much more like the original readers of the New Testament than we were a century ago. We are (to use Peter’s language) “exiles” in the dispersion, called to silence the opposition by our character and hope. We have the opportunity to make spiritual realities attractive by our mercy, love, justice, and persuasiveness,

rather than by forcing them on a post-Christian culture that does not understand them and does not, at first, love them.

“Graciousness and respect” are not to be seen as alternatives to political engagement, but as the way of political engagement.

Nor are they to be seen as “tricks” for turning politics in our direction. They are a demonstration of God’s alternative reality—the kingdom of the God who wants only volunteers in his army and who died to qualify them for enlistment.

19) Is there no place for righteous anger in politics and political dispute?

Yes there is, but it will need to be exercised with wisdom.

Wisdom encourages us to ask “Where, how and why do we express righteous anger?” As to “where” and “how”, the answer is, “Freely and at any time, when we are alone in God’s presence”. The psalms invite our full and genuine self-expression: God would much rather have us venting with him, however imperfectly we do it, than avoiding him.

What is a bit trickier is what we do when we are with other people—and the “how” will vary depending on who those people are and how many of them are present. With close and trusted friends we ought to be able to give vent to our anger, knowing that they will not repeat or be undone by what is unwise in what we say.

With larger groups, the likelihood of being misunderstood and/or misrepresented grows dramatically. With such misunderstandings and misrepresentations can come damage to the church and to the reputation of Christ. In such settings we will need to be circumspect, guided by passages like the following:

Ephesians 4:26-27: Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.

Ephesians 4:15-16: Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Romans 12:17-19: Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

Regarding “why” we express righteous anger, we do so for a number of good reasons: (1) What we are protesting is wrong (think of Amos’ condemnation of injustice and Jesus’ public condemnation of the Pharisees); (2) We hope by our expression of

anger to change the behavior and attitude of our hearers. But we will need to do so rarely and after much heart searching, remembering that our motives are always mixed (see *Eph. 4:26* above) and our expression of it flawed: *let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;* ²⁰ *for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires (James 1:19-20.*

SOME THOUGHTS ON ONE PARTICULAR ISSUE

Reflections on Climate Change and Christian Responsibility

Bible Principles

1) God made and loves his creation

- *Genesis 1:31a: God saw all that he had made and behold it was very good*
“Good” (suitable, beautiful) not just to us, but to him.
- *Gen.9:9-10, 15: “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you...I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh...”* God is not indifferent to nature: he is so committed to its care that he includes creation in his covenant with people. Neither may we be indifferent to creation.
- *Job 39:26-27: “Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?” (39:26-27), or, “Can **you** draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord? Can **you** put a rope in its nose, or pierce its jaw with a hook?”*

See also *Proverbs 8:27-31*, where Wisdom invites us to share in God’s delight over the work of his hands: *When he established the heavens, I was there; ... when he marked out the foundations of the earth,* ³⁰ *then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,* ³¹ *rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.*

God joys in his **non**-human creation – in its beauty and power: so must we. Not to do so is deny that we are made in his image.

2) God wants us as his image bearings to share his love for his creation:

This will involve caring for it:

Genesis 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work (till) it and keep it. “To work” (Hebrew ‘avad’) connotes “to serve”. “To keep” (“shamar”) connotes “to protect”.

This will involve delighting in it:

Psalm 104: 24; 31-34 “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. ... May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works—who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.” We delight with God in the wisdom of his creation: Not to study, delight in, and care for what God has made is like trashing a Rembrandt.

3) So tied are we to the rest of creation that when we sin, nature suffers:

*Hos. 4:1-3: “There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying and murder and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. **Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish, together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.**”*

Our lives and the health of the larger creation do not proceed on separate tracks. To the contrary, God has so ordered things that, when we sin, nature mourns and languishes. For us to be indifferent to nature’s groanings is to deny the built-in bond. It is furthermore to be indifferent to our sins, for nature’s sufferings point to them. (See also Is. 24:4ff; Joel 1:9ff, Romans 8:20-22).

4) God loves the created world so much that he...

- **...took on a human body—forever.**

John 1.10: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

- **...died to redeem it.**

Colossians 1:15-20 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Not to care for the creation (which is part of “all things”) is to ignore the cross. For us to care for people or for the human soul exclusively is to ignore the fullness of what God died to redeem.

- **...has an eternal plan for it.**

Revelation 21:1-5 “Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Not to care for creation is to ignore eschatology. By caring for creation we align ourselves with God’s good purpose for all things, anticipating the cosmic “fix” that is coming.

5) Caring for creation is close to God’s heart because it entails caring for the poor

James 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Isaiah 58:6-11 ⁶ “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? ⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ ...¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. ¹¹ And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

When something bad happens to our lived environment, the poor and the weak are disproportionately affected. This concerns us

because we know that it concerns God, who has a special concern for the powerless.

Summary: “We live in God’s creation. We breathe it, we eat it, we walk on it, we love it. We are God’s creation and we were created to care for it (and to care for each other in our care for it). We are not to take it for granted. Creation care is a moral obligation, to care for the garden, the world of living creatures and the rest of creation as well.” (Dick Keyes)

Care for Creation and the Present Climate Crisis

(Heavily dependent on notes from Allen Drew, The Climate Witness Project)

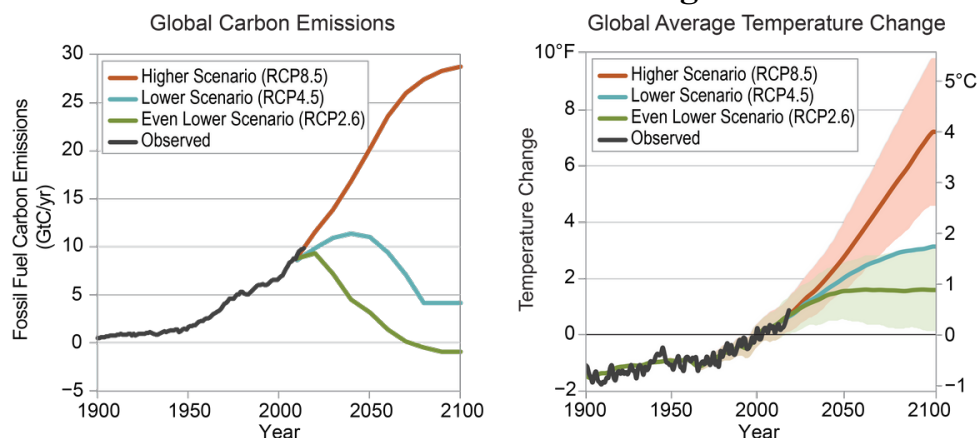
Though the causal relationship between increased CO2 emissions and hotter temperatures of air, land and water is complex, 97% to 98% of published climate scientists agree that global warming is happening and is happening faster than at any time in human history.

The vast majority have concluded that that it is caused by human CO2 emissions. All are agreed that the warming is itself catastrophic: more severe weather patterns, drought, water shortages, disease bearing water, and coastal flooding are all on the rise with terrible implications especially for the world’s poor. The window for doing something to mitigate the disaster is rapidly closing.

Some Data and Projections

Despite the Paris agreement that warns not to exceed 1.5°C of warming, global warming is on pace to reach 1.5°C between 2030-2050 and may still reach 4°C by 2100, depending on what we do. Climate change is already happening.

Projected GHG Emissions & Global Warming



Observed and projected changes in global average temperature (right) depend on observed and projected emissions of carbon dioxide from fossil fuel combustion (left) and emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases from other human activities, including land use and land-use change. Under a pathway consistent with a higher scenario (RCP8.5), fossil fuel carbon emissions continue to increase throughout the century, and by 2080-2099, global average temperature is projected to increase by 4.2 – 8.5 degrees F (2.4 – 4.7 degrees C; shown by the burnt orange shaded area) relative to the 1986-2015 average. Under a lower scenario (RCP4.5), fossil fuel carbon emissions peak mid-century then decrease, and global average temperature is projected to increase by 1.7 – 4.4 degrees F (0.9 -2.4 degrees C; range not shown on graph) relative to 1986-2015. Under an even lower scenario (RCP2.6), assuming carbon emissions from fossil fuels have already peaked, temperature increases could be limited to 0.4 – 2.7 degrees F (0.2 – 1.5 degrees C; shown by the green shaded area) relative to 1986-2015. Thick lines within the shaded areas represent the average of multiple climate models. The shaded ranges illustrate the 5% to 95% confidence intervals for the respective projections. In all RCP scenarios, carbon emissions from land use and land-use change amount to less than 1 GtC by 2020 and fall thereafter. Limiting the rise in global average temperature to less than 2.2 degrees F (1.2 degrees C) relative to 1986-2015 is approximately equivalent to 3.6 degrees F (2 degrees C) or less relative to preindustrial temperatures, consistent with the aim of the Paris Agreement (see Box 2.4). Source: adapted from Wuebbles et al. 2017.

The threat of Climate Change

Speed - We are on pace to irreversibly destroy our planetary environment in a single human lifetime. We've contributed more carbon to the atmosphere in the last 25 years than in all human history before.

Scope - Climate destabilization will impact everything - environment, species survival, human health, agriculture, economy, refugee crises, and war. The UN describes it as a “threat multiplier.”

Severity ...

Major Effects of Climate Change:

- 1. Habitat Destruction and Species Extinctions** - Currently in the 6th mass extinction of the planet - losing species at a rate of 200/day right now (about 1 every 7 minutes). At 2 C of warming, now expected to be our best case scenario, there will be no more coral reefs.
- 2. Major Increase in Damages Due to Floods, Droughts, and Storms** - On our current emissions trajectory, we can expect to accumulate \$600T in climate damages (double the total wealth of the world today).

3. **Massive Human Displacement** - On current trajectory, by 2050 all major Middle Eastern and Indian cities will be unlivably hot during the summer, sea level rise would make many coastal cities unlivable, and global displacement of people due to heat and flooding would be 100 million (almost 50% more than total displaced people today).
4. **Massive Impact On Human Health** - At 2C of warming, 150 million people expected to die from air quality issues alone (more than all deaths from WWI and WWII combined). Tropical diseases will increase and spread. There are many other health issues as well.
5. **Decrease in Agricultural Productivity as Population Increases**
- As much as 50% less production as our world reaches 10 billion people. Widespread food insecurity and starvation.
6. **Increased Potential for Wars and the Collapse of States** - The widespread pressures of climate degradation will make states less stable.

Why should climate change be a concern of the church?

- **Being in Sync with God's heart** - He loves creation so much that He entered it and died for it.
- **Being Good Stewards** - our original calling involves serving and protecting creation
- **Pursuing Shalom** - the climate crisis is a direct threat to holistic flourishing
- **Seeking Justice for the Poor** - the impacts of the climate crisis are massively unjust
- **Being Salt and Light** - we're called to be a preserving force and to be a witness to the world of God's love for the world
- **Honoring Truth** - the science on climate is overwhelming
- **Loving Our Neighbors** - all our decisions are public