

Skills for Cultivating Political Peace in the Church—Part 1 The Beatitudes and Upstream Politics--Handout

Access discussion handout on the website:

“Charlie Drew’s Class Resources” at <http://gracepasadena.org/livestreammedia>

Opening

Georgetown professor Paul Miller describes and critiques the two political visions (“progressivism” and the “nationalist right”) that are presently vying in America (*The Religion of American Greatness*) (See also Justin Giboney: “Backbone, Mouthpiece and Good News” <https://comment.org/backbone-mouthpiece-and-good-news>).

“Progressivism” defined and critiqued

“Progressivism is best understood as a philosophy of history, a belief that history unfolds in the direction of progressive policy preferences... Such a ...narrative has no moral horizon or framework and no way of justifying what its policy preferences are, other than vague appeals to ‘the children’, ‘the future,’ and ‘the right side of history,’ which mean whatever they want those empty phrases to mean. Shorn of any fixed moral commitments, progressivism deteriorates into the lowest common denominator available within the rhetoric of freedom: individual autonomy, personal discovery, self-expression, fulfillment, and empowerment... In this light, the progressive commitments to abortion, the sexual revolution, and identity politics are a feature, not a bug, of the movement. They express the fundamental core of what progressivism is: a rebellion against any and all constraints and limitations on personal independence, including the limits of nature itself. Similarly, the hectoring, authoritarian temperament that gives rise to speech codes and cancel culture flows naturally from progressivism. Progressivism is a religion, but one without grace. It is a return to Puritan roots in the worst sense of the word, an endless crusade of moral reform with no forgiveness, no atonement, and no savior.” (p. 258)

The “nationalist right” defined and critiqued

“White American Christians bear substantial responsibility for the damage done to trust and common citizenship in the United States. By politicizing our religion and insisting that it is central to American identity while turning a blind eye to the continuing realities of racial injustices, or in past centuries actually defending slavery and segregation, we* gave non-Christians and non-Whites little reason to trust us or believe that they could peacefully share a country with us. Our resistance to the loss of White Protestant influence at every stage in American history has not endeared us to others...

“Conservative White Christians believe that the left is the aggressor in the culture war and that conservative efforts since then have been a justified, defensive attempt to preserve something good and decent from the civilization we inherited... White Christians can only convince ourselves that we are not the aggressors if we view our previous dominance in American life as something natural, providential, and good. But the pre-1960s Anglo-Protestant dominance in American history was itself a standing aggression: most obviously against Catholics, Native Americans, and especially African Americans, but also an aggression against American ideals and thus in principle *against every single American.*” (pp. 258-259)

Private work:

- 1) How in a sentence or two does Miller define and critique progressivism?
- 2) What, if anything, do you disagree with in his definition and/or critique?
- 3) How in a sentence or two does Miller define and critique the “nationalist right”?
- 4) What, if anything, do you disagree with in his definition and/or critique?

Small group discussion:

Share your private work with each other. Don’t argue. Just report and listen, asking questions for clarification.

The Beatitudes as a mandate for “upstream” politics

² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven. ⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. ⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. ⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. ⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. ¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:2-12)

I) **Hungering and thirsting for righteousness**

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

- Personal meaning: “right with God and each other”—
 - Love God with all that we have and love our neighbor as ourselves (*Mt 22:37*).
 - If we *hunger and thirst after righteousness*, we will be *satisfied* – “filled up.”

- Cosmic meaning: “Righteousness” filling the earth.
 - Longing for love everywhere at every level.
 - Longing for everyone to see God as he is, to love what he loves, to hate what he hates, to enjoy him and honor him in all things
God’s name *hallowed* and his *will done on as it is done in heaven*.

Small group discussion:

In what ways might you allow the beatitudes to do a better job shaping your public life—your political and social involvements?

II) **Some specifics on *hungering and thirsting for righteousness* in public life**

(i) respect, (ii) humility, (iii) trust, (iv) patience, and (v) hope.

A) Respect

Jesus and Nicodemus

- Respecting people’s stories
- Respecting people’s needs, *loving our neighbors as we love ourselves*.
Satisfying work....
Working plumbing....
First amendment freedom....

- Wanting these things deeply (*hungering and thirsting*)

B) Humility

Poor in spirit

- Wisdom—from any source.
- Not smug or belligerent.
- *Hungry* for what we do not know or understand.

David French

- “Negative polarization” in politics.

C. S. Lewis

- “I believe in political equality. But there are two opposite reasons for being a democrat (small “d”).
You may think all people so good that they deserve a share in the government of the commonwealth, and so wise that the commonwealth needs their advice. That is, in my opinion, the false, romantic doctrine of democracy. On the other hand, you may believe fallen people to be so wicked that not one of them [and not one political grouping among them] can be trusted with any irresponsible [i.e., unconstrained] power over his fellows. That I believe to be the true ground of democracy... Since we

have learned to sin, we have found, as Lord Acton says, that ‘all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’” (from “Membership” in *The Weight of Glory*)

Having an honest and humble “discovery” chat.

C) Trust

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Not fearful, frantic, manipulative, or violent.

Peacemakers because we ourselves are at peace.

Apocalyptic political rhetoric.

Josh Wood in *The Guardian*:

- “In the 2016 presidential election Donald Trump surged into office spreading paranoid warnings to voters that if he were not elected, the US would become a failed socialist state and that immigrants entering the country over the southern border would spread violence and disease... [He made the second observation even more forcefully in the Presidential Debates in June and September].
- “Andrew Yang said: ‘To me, without dramatic change, the best-case scenario is a hyper-stratified society like something out of Hunger Games... with the occasional mass shooting. The worst case is widespread despair, violence, and the utter collapse of our society’
- “...According to a poll taken in 2018, 31% of Americans said it was likely that there would be a civil war within the next five years, including 37% of Democrats (2 May 2019).”

Such rhetoric won’t trigger us.

D) Patience

The meek will inherit the earth (v. 5)

Using opportunities but never forcing the Father’s hand.

Learning from Jesus...

- Not having to win right now.
- Never growing disheartened when our efforts fail or we suffer for them (v. 10--*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*).
- Content simply....

Not learning from the world.

- “True American patriots may have to resort to violence to save the country” (23%: up from 15% in 2021).
- 31% of white Evangelical protestants support the idea.
(Politics and Religion Research Institute report-- Oct. 2023)

E) Hope

Blessed are... (9x!!)

To *hunger and thirst for righteousness* is to hope.

Celebrating even the “bad guys”.

Bush to Clinton transition:

“Whether because of his respect for the institution, lessons from his father, bad memories of his own transition (there were rumors that some Clinton staffers had removed the W keys from the White House computers on their way out the door), or just basic decency, President Bush would end up doing all he could to make the eleven weeks between my election and his departure go smoothly. Every office in the White House provided my team with detailed “how to” manuals. His staffers made themselves available to meet with their successors, answer questions, and even be shadowed as they carried out their duties.

The Bush daughters, Barbara and Jenna, by that time young adults, rearranged their schedules to give Malia and Sasha their own tour of the ‘fun’ parts of the White House. I promised myself that when the time came, I would treat my successor the same way.” (Barack Obama, *A Promised Land*, p. 207)

Bi-partisan moments:

The House bill against Asian hate crimes (5.18.21): 364 to 62 (94 to 1 in the Senate)

- “Catching” our political enemies doing the right thing and commending them for it.

- Jesus will sort out the motives (the *Parable of the Wheat and the Tares*).
- Celebrate a public good as a public good—as a picture of our hope.

The deepest aim in public life.

Not...

- to make ourselves happier, or better, or safer, or prouder, or wealthier.
- to win.

Rather...

- to make our heavenly Father happier

We have help (“living hope”).

Christ in the Beatitudes and in us.

- *Poor in spirit*
- *Mourning and hungering for righteousness*
- Full of *mercy*
- *Pure in heart*
- *Peace-maker*, through *persecution and reviling*

Christ in us the hope of glory (Col. 1)

Singing: O the Deep, Deep, Love of Jesus

Samuel Trevor Francis (1834-1925)

Ardrey Assad

O the deep, deep love of Jesus	O the deep, deep love of Jesus
Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free;	‘Tis a heaven of heavens to me
Rolling as a mighty ocean	And it lifts me up to glory
In its fullness over me.	For it lifts me up to Thee.

Underneath me, all around me	O the deep, deep love of Jesus
Is the current of his love;	Spread his praise from shore to shore
Leading onward, leading homeward	How he loveth, ever loveth,
To thy glorious rest above.	Changeth never, never more.

Homework

This week have a cup of coffee with a Christian whose politics you don’t like.

- Say (and mean) that you really want to listen and understand their position.
- Ask questions aimed at understanding not only what they believe but why
- Listen: committed to understanding rather than winning.
- Determine that love (for people) and trust (in God), rather than fear, will drive your tone.
- Seek common ground, beyond differing political strategies, in shared moral principles.
- Pray together about what you can agree on.
- If you cannot agree, then agree to disagree, parting as friends.
- Have the Lord’s Supper together as soon as possible.

Frequently asked Questions

Available on the website:

“Charlie Drew’s Class Resources” at <http://gracepasadena.org/livestreammedia>

Q and A

Resources and Bibliography

Movements and courses

Braver Angels: <https://braverangels.org/>

Not a Christian group, it nevertheless models and teaches skills for the sort of constructive and illuminating red/blue engagement we need in the church. A blurb from their website: “Braver Angels

leads the nation's largest cross-partisan, volunteer-led movement to bridge the political divide. Through community gatherings, real debates, and grassroots leaders working together, we're offering America what it needs to overcome the bitterness of our partisan divide."

Christian Civics-Foundations Course. A ten-week free video course. It is an illuminating, disarming, wise, accessible, theologically sound, and practical resource that I highly recommend to pastors and churches everywhere. Produced by the Center for Christian Civics, a Washington DC based non-partisan ministry helping pastors, ministry leaders, and lay people integrate civic stewardship into their community's program of spiritual formation, and political de-polarization into their vision for witness and evangelism. It offers workshops, Bible studies, podcasts, articles, and recommended readings. <https://www.christiancivics.org/foundations>

The "And" Campaign. <https://andcampaign.org/> Justin Giboney leads a prophetic and practical movement aimed at bringing both sides of America's polarized world under the critique of the Bible.

Giboney's essay *Backbone, Mouthpiece and Good News: a Word from the Black Church* (December 2023) captures the essence of the movement, offering a rebuke of both conservatism and progressivism in the tradition of black oratory. <https://comment.org/backbone-mouthpiece-and-good-news>

Books

Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory* (2024). A journalist raised in a vibrant EPC church in the mid-west, Alberta writes as a forthright believer from inside the world of protestant evangelicalism. He tells stories that make vivid and disturbing the politicizing of the evangelical church.

Charles Drew, *Surprised by Community: Republicans and Democrats in the Same Pew.* I suggest practices, ways of thinking, and strategies for in-church discussion that help believers engage in politics while making room for one another when their political convictions differ.

David French, *Divided We Fall.* French is a columnist, evangelical, and long-time conservative who has given particular attention to the defense of religious free speech and practice. In this book French analyzes the polarization of our time, warning that we could easily lose our two-hundred year experiment in united self-rule, while offering some hopeful direction.

Paul D. Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness: What's Wrong with Christian Nationalism.* Miller distinguishes between Christian republicanism, which brings Christian principles to bear on how we think about and structure government (say, the intrinsic dignity and the corruptibility of people, and the role of common grace), and Christian nationalism, which seeks to make a culture Christian by force. His gracious and nuanced critique of the latter is persuasive because he writes as an insider—a long time Republican who has served in a Republican administration, a dedicated evangelical Christian, and a veteran. American historian George Marsden endorses his work: "Conservative Christians who suspect he may be wrong should at least give him a hearing. More progressive Christians can also learn from this balanced and constructive approach."

Richard Mouw, *How to be a Patriotic Christian: Love of Country as Love of Neighbor.* A brief, winsome, wise, and practical guide. While urging us not to withdraw cynically from public engagement, Mouw (President and Professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological 'Seminary) warns against the idolatry intrinsic in Christian nationalism. He grapples with sticky questions such as how to honor national holidays in church and the place of protests in forging a more perfect union.

Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times.* Rah helps us build lament more deeply into our private lives and church culture, walking us through the book of *Lamentations*.

Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Ballot and the Bible: How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics and Where We Go from Here* (2023). Schiess reminds us with sensitivity and nuance of the all-important difference between the authority of the Bible (certain) and the authority of our interpretations of the Bible (much less certain). She documents our tendency to forget this distinction through our national story, from the era of the pilgrims to the present day, offering helpful advice along the way on how to be humble readers, together, of the Scriptures.

Kaitlyn Schiess, *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of Our Neighbor* (2020). Like Michael Wear (*The Spirit of Our Politics*--see below), Schiess aims at helping us with "upstream politics"—with cultivating through spiritual disciplines the attitudes and perspectives that shape us before we head "downstream" into public engagements.

Schiess interviews Wear in the IV Press podcast *The Disrupters: Faith changing Culture*, December 17, 2023, [here's](#)

John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*--4th edition (Zondervan 2006). Though somewhat dated, Stott's work is still enormously helpful, offering thoughtful and practical insight into Christian engagement with many of the issues that trouble and divide us. Stott focuses particularly on war, creation care, global poverty, human rights, work, business, diversity, sexuality, marriage, abortion, euthanasia, and biotechnology.

Michael Wear, *Reclaiming Hope*. An illuminating memoir from a Christian who worked on faith-based initiatives in the Obama White House.

Michael Wear, *The Spirit of Our Politics: Spiritual Formation and the Renovation of Public Life*. Wear gives attention to what I call "upstream politics"—the attitudes and perspectives that we get to bring to public life before we engage in policy discussions and advocacy. He aims at helping us cultivate an approach that aims at healing rather than division, kindness rather than hatred, and hope rather than despair.

Peter Wehner, *Death of Politics*. An informative, hopeful, and challenging account of modern politics by a Christian who is a conservative thinker and speech writer. He served 12 years in three administrations in numerous federal agencies and as a senior advisor to the White House.

N. T. Wright and Michael Bird, *Jesus and the Powers*. With close and challenging attention to (1) the long, complex, and nuanced history of the relationship between church and state and (2) what the Bible actually teaches, the authors challenge both our tendency to withdraw from political engagement and to engage in ways that Jesus never would. They ask, and begin to answer, "How do we build for the kingdom without falling into the trap of spiritual isolationism or being led into captivity to a political master?" [NB: There is another, very different, book of the same title].