Contents

Introduction ..............................................7
1. Where Faith and Politics Meet .................13
2. Christ, Christians, and the Culture Wars ........29
3. How Should We Live? The Ethics of Jesus ........45
4. Spiritual Maturity and Seeing Gray ............67
5. What Would Jesus Say to America? ...........91
1. Where Faith and Politics Meet

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, / to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” —Luke 4:16-21

When we were children, most of us learned that there are two things one does not talk about among friends: religion and politics. This book discusses both. Both topics tend to generate strong views and passionate debates. Politics, in particular, can be a delicate subject. So, let me assure you that my goal is not to convince you to hold any particular religious or political views. Instead, it simply is to convince you that, as a person of faith, you should be involved in the political process. In fact, it is my belief that people of faith are essential to the political process.

Faith and Politics

Let us begin by considering the definitions of faith and politics. There are many different ways to define the word faith. For the
purposes of our discussion, I am referring to our core values or beliefs—specifically, our beliefs about God, about what it means to be human, and about what is right and wrong. Even if you do not believe in God, you still have faith because you have core values and beliefs about whether or not there is a God, what it means to be human, and what is right and wrong. Once we understand that this is what faith is, we must ask ourselves this question: If I am not engaging these beliefs in the political process, what means and criteria am I using to make political decisions? You see, we simply cannot compartmentalize our faith, saying, “My faith belongs over here, and the life I live during the week belongs over there.” Our faith is meant to influence every part of our lives—how we conduct business, how we treat our neighbors, how we interact with family and friends, and how we engage in politics.

Now consider the definition of politics. If you have taken any political-science classes in the last thirty years, you probably have encountered this definition of politics given by Harold Lasswell, a prominent political scientist and sociologist of the last century: Politics is the process for determining who gets what when and how. This definition of politics is about power, distribution, and control. If politics is indeed the process for determining these things, then it certainly requires some measure of morality—some sense of what is just and unjust. If you do not bring a sense of what is just and unjust—what is right and wrong—to the table when doing politics, then on what are you basing your politics? Are you taking a poll to see what the majority says before making any political decision? Of course, in a democracy the will of the majority is important, but it is not everything. There must be checks and balances because the majority might wish to do something that is unjust. This is why people of faith must be engaged in the political
process—people who have a moral conscience, a sense of what is right and wrong, and who thoughtfully consider the issues.

In a speech delivered to the progressive evangelical organization Sojourners, Barack Obama said this:

The problems of poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed . . . are rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness—in the imperfections of man. Solving these problems will require changes in government policy, but it will also require changes in hearts and a change in minds. . . . Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King—indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history—were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their “personal morality” into public policy debates is a practical absurdity.¹

Indeed, there is an undeniable connection between faith and politics.

Some Words of Caution

Having established the connection between faith and politics, it is important to offer some words of caution. When it comes to interjecting our faith into the political process, I would like to suggest three cautions—two on the side of involving our faith in politics, and one on the side of creating a clear separation of the two.
1. It is dangerous to use the language of faith as a cloak or means of excusing or justifying evil acts.

We’ve all seen or read examples of this. On September 11, 2001, the world watched as extremist Muslims flew airplanes into buildings, and the last thing they said as they did this was, “God is great.” Likewise, Christians through the centuries have done many things in the name of Jesus that were evil and wrong.

The third commandment is the prohibition against misusing the name of God, and we tend to think this has to do with cussing. Certainly, that is an application of the commandment; but in the days when Moses gave the commandment, no one would have dared to say the name of God casually as we do today. Instead, the commandment had to do with speaking on behalf of God—claiming things that God never would have claimed. When we understand the commandment in this way, we see that there are two categories of people who most frequently violate the third commandment. The first is preachers, and the second is politicians. We must be wary when a politician begins to use religion as a way of rallying support for a particular position. The position may be consistent with the kingdom of God, or it may not. If we see that the position being advocated by using God’s name actually hurts people, we should be greatly concerned.

A certain political figure once said, “My Christian feeling tells me that my Lord and Savior is a warrior. He calls my attention to the man who, lonely and surrounded by a few supporters, recognized what they, the Jews, really were, and called for a battle against them, and who by God was not the greatest sufferer, but was the greatest warrior.” Do you know who said that? Adolf Hitler spoke these words in 1922 as he was advocating his Nazi party in the cities and villages of Germany.
To be sure, we must be discerning when people use religious language to advocate political positions. We must ask questions and critique their positions. They may be speaking the truth about what God would uphold, or they may not.

2. It is dangerous to oversimplify complex issues, being unwilling to question our own assumptions, biblical interpretations, and theology.

Often we want the world to be black and white. We want simple solutions to complex problems. We want a candidate to tell us in two minutes or less how he or she would solve the Social Security problem, deal with the environment, handle immigration reform, and ensure national security. Do you think you can solve these issues in two minutes? But that is what we want—two-minute answers. Actually, we want sixty-second sound bites that solve complex problems, and that is dangerous. There are people who are willing to give us sixty-second answers, and many of us gravitate toward those people—people who see the world in black and white. We must be willing to look for the answers on both “sides” and to realize that often the truth is somewhere in between. Unfortunately, we tend to want simple answers, and so we are prone to oversimplify. People of faith do this often. I encourage you to remember that your own views have changed over time. If you are growing in your faith and maturing as a human being, your views are going to change over time. Yet often we’re looking for those simple views we had when we were teens or young adults.

In the last presidential election, the folks at CNN decided they would try to draw in younger viewers by allowing people to submit questions for the candidates via video on YouTube. There was a particular question related to religion that captures the essence of the oversimplification I am describing. It came from a man I will
call Bob, and I will paraphrase his question to the candidates. He held up the Bible and said, “Your answer to this question will tell me all I need to know about you. Do you believe in this book?” The question I have is this: Is that really all we need to know in order to decide which candidate we will support for president of the United States? Besides, when it comes to biblical interpretation, there are a lot of places that are “gray”—places where we must use nuance and understand the complex ways people thought in the past and how we apply that in the present. We need to be people of faith who recognize complexity and think carefully about the issues rather than look for simple answers to complex problems.

Perhaps some visual examples can help to demonstrate the importance of recognizing complexity and seeing gray. For a very simple graph, a black line on a piece of white paper is sufficient. It is two-dimensional. It is what it is. Some issues are like that. There is a clear right and a clear wrong with no ambiguity or complexity at all. Most of life, however, is not like that. Consider a two-dimensional, black and white photograph of a field. Because there are no shades of gray, the photo simply does not capture the reality behind the picture. But if we begin to add a little gray to the photo, suddenly we can see the beauty and differentiate the sunflowers