

“How to be Christian in the Election”: Practices for Civil Renewal

Third Church | Fall 2024

Welcome! The aim of this class is to explore how we can best love our neighbor across political differences and help rebuild the fabric of our civic life as followers of Jesus. We are not here to debate issues and policies, but to invigorate practices of civic renewal through our commitment to the way of Jesus. Our focus is to learn how to practice love in a time of confusion, division and ideological chaos.

The main heart of this class, weeks 2-6, will involve working through 10 practices or disciplines that help us to be wise, loving participants in our civic life, so we can contribute to the common good of our society as Christians. The content we'll cover is based on material from the AND Campaign. The goal of the AND Campaign is “to educate and organize Christians for civic and cultural engagement that results in better representation, more just and compassionate policies and a healthier political culture.”¹

In weeks 2-6, we hope this class will be full of conversation and exchange. But today is our introduction and will be more content-heavy. Heidi and I thought we should be transparent with you about where we both stand in our assumptions and the foundational beliefs in the way we are approaching this topic. There is so much disagreement about this among Christians, and there are many different interpretations of Scripture around church-state relations. We are not asking you to agree with us about all of this (we probably don't even agree with each other about everything!), but we think it would be helpful to be transparent about our approach.

1// FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

First, let's talk about some basic theological principles about faith and politics, and how we understand the role of the nation-state and government as it relates to Christians and the church

- The Bible teaches that government is given by God as a gift to humanity to bring welfare, safety, order and justice to human communities (1 Peter 2:13-17, Prov. 8:15, 21:1; Daniel 2:21). Romans 13:3-4 is a well-known text on the role of government, and the Reformed tradition has historically interpreted this text to mean that the government has two basic functions: 1/ to administer justice by punishing wrong doers, and 2/ promoting public welfare by providing for basic material needs of people, particular the weak and poor of society.² There is no particular form of government that is mandated by God as the right form of government. Christians have lived and flourished in every kind of nation-state.
- Christians are called to be good citizens and engage in the common good (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Paul urges Christians to pray for kings and rulers that they might rule wisely and establish environments that help the gospel flourish (1 Timothy 2:2). Christians are called to be good citizens, loving their neighbors, participating in civic life, being salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16),

¹ <https://andcampaign.org/civic-revival/>

² “The role of the state is to provide for the common safety and peace of all, to preserve the tranquility of the dominion, to restrain the stirrings of restless men. To help those forcibly oppressed, to punish evil deeds.” John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.9,11.

not withdrawing from society but engaging in it in a way that brings life. We are people who work for the renewal of all things, praying for the Kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven. As tempting as it may be at times to stick our heads in the sand, Jesus calls us to engage in the world around us, and being informed and engaged in our society's political life is one way we can do that.

- While Christians are called to be good citizens, at the same time Christians also recognize that government is a delegated authority, and that the authority of the state is always derivative, not definitive. We know that human government is made of fallen human beings and must never be blindly obeyed. We see instances in Scripture when believers chose to defy the state when it contravened their obedience to God (Daniel 6, Acts 5:29). Our true allegiance is the triune God, and our primary citizenship is in the Kingdom of God. We can be Americans, Nigerian, British, etc, and be proud of such identifications, but our allegiance to earthly nation states must always be subordinated to our loyalty to the Kingdom of Jesus.³ We are not “first Americans/Republicans/Democrats”... we are first followers of Jesus.
- The Kingdom of God, as manifested in Jesus Christ, is very much in the world but is not of this world (John 18:36). Therefore there is no political party, platform or policy that fully aligns with the values and vision of Jesus' Kingdom, for the Kingdom of God transcends and contravenes all human programs and institutions. Our allegiance is aligned with the One who is crucified and risen, “and of the increase of his government there will be no end” (Isaiah 9:7).
- While important, politics is not the main or even the best way that Christians influence and can be involved in society. While we seek to be engaged in public life, we should reject a political supremacy that views politics as the primary vehicle of societal change. The Bible terms this idolatry. We rest our hopes for our nation and community on no human leader or political party, and we should refuse to allow our faith to be instrumentalized for political gain. When we rest our hopes in a political party, or when we use apocalyptic language that suggests “the future of America hangs on this election” or “our life will be destroyed if this candidate wins,” we expose our political idolatry and have made politics and political power the ultimate force.
- While there are many ways that Scripture speaks to our public and collective political life and the issues we face, this does not translate neatly into modern political parties and policies. Christians can come to very different policy conclusions even as they hold common commitments. For example, Scripture is crystal clear that Christians must be concerned for the poor, but there are no modern policy directives in the Bible. For example, should we shrink government and allow private capital markets to allocate resources, or should we expand government to give the state more power to redistribute wealth?⁴ Creedal, bible believing Christians have affirmed both perspectives. It would be unwise to claim that one of these ways is more “biblical” than others,

³ This is why our Session has a policy to not have an American flag in the sanctuary. Not because we aren't patriotic, but because when we gather as the people of God, we are gathering as citizens of the Kingdom. The Session statement about the flag in worship reads: “We are Americans and we are proud of that aspect of our identity. But as Christians, we know our primary identity is being “in Christ” (Col. 3:4) and citizens of the Kingdom of God. Our nationality is part of our secondary identity, as is our gender, our profession, ethnicity, and other elements of our personal distinctiveness. In worship, we display what is our primary identity above all else.”

⁴ See Tim Keller, “How Do Christians fit into the two-party system? They don't.”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html>

because when it comes to policy, Christians must seek to discern and respectfully debate the wisest way to apply biblical ethics to modern life.

- The modern two-party American system complicates this and should create conflict for every biblical Christian. First of all, while holding very different concerns, both our modern political parties are profoundly shaped by Enlightenment individualist values but apply this hyper individualism in opposite ways. Historically, modern liberals have posited that the government should have more control over the distribution of income but should leave people free to do what they choose when it comes to personal morality. Conservatives historically have posited that the government should have much greater say and control over morality (marriage, abortion), but leave people free as individuals to do whatever they want with their wealth.⁵ The political binary of our system has resulted in a situation in which conservative evangelicals have historically sided with Republicans, emphasizing the concerns of personal morality (abortion, marriage, sexuality), and mainline Protestants and African-American Christians have sided with Democrats, emphasizing issues of social morality and justice (equality for minorities, justice for the poor, care for the environment). But neither party represents the full values of the Kingdom, and voting for one essentially forces you to leave a part of your faith at the door - either personal ethics or social ethics. Political parties will advocate for some biblical values that we can affirm, but no party supports all of them. When a Christian suggests otherwise by being so indefatigably committed to a political platform or party, he or she has embraced loyalty to an earthly agenda over and above the agenda of Jesus Christ, which cannot be contained or owned by any human program.
- Therefore, when it comes to voting, each person must consider his or her own conscience before God, seek to be led by the Holy Spirit, talk with trusted Christian friends, and ultimately cast their vote in a way that most aligns with what they believe to be the way of love and best promotes the common good. But we do so understanding the ambiguity of what we do and recognize we will always be choosing a candidate that does not fully align with our values.⁶ This also means we must not idolize one party and demonize the other, and respect fellow Christians who may come to different conclusions.
- The Church is called to be a counter-cultural community of love and unity within a divided world. The Christian church is not a voting block. Every congregation is (should be) an expression not of common opinions, social views, or political affiliations, but of a common experience of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Jesus modeled having people of diverse political positions in his community, as his own disciples included Simon the zealot (radical conservative) and Matthew the tax collector (social liberal), both who were now brothers under the same King. As such, we seek to build an uncommon unity across races, classes, and political positions, recognizing we are held together across our differences by our shared faith in a resurrected Lord.

⁵ See Tim Keller, "Reflections on Faith and Politics," *Redeemer Report*, January 2005.

⁶ For this reason theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas says the first thing you should do after you vote is confess your sins!

2// THE CURRENT CRISIS

This class is about how we can address and help heal our current unhealthy political environment. But to do that we need to understand what we're dealing with and discern the nature of our society's crisis.

- While there is no “Christian” or “Biblical” form of government, we are in agreement with many before us that modern liberal democracy is “the least worst option” for human governance.⁷ By “liberal” we mean a government that regards personal freedoms as not subject to limitation unless completely necessary, and by “democratic” we mean a state that includes voting rights for all citizens equally and each citizen’s vote has the same weight. While America has never truly been a “Christian nation,” the idea of the liberal democratic state is most definitely informed by Christian theology.⁸ It is impossible to affirm things like “it is self-evident that all men [and women] are created equal” unless you are shaped, knowingly or unknowingly, by the biblical vision of humanity in Genesis 1:28, in which all people are created equally in the image of God. Liberal democracy is a form of government that allows for the dignity of every person, the honoring and love of neighbors, the free practice of personal beliefs, and for Christians, allows for the flourishing of the gospel.
- It’s always been the case that liberal democracies like the United States run the risk of fragmentation, since we lack the stability provided by a monarch. Authority in liberal democracies comes from the people, “from below,” not from a king, tsar, or sultan, “from above.” But the problem with authority “from below” is that it must be rooted in some kind of shared consensus about the nature of justice and the common good. Without some kind of shared social vision, cohesion begins to fall apart, and we resort less to persuasion and cooperation and more to power and manipulation.
- In his recent book *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis*, James Davison Hunter chronicles the erosion of any collective moral story or way of perceiving the world since the 1960s, a trend that has rapidly intensified in the 21st century. There has been a loss of any kind of notion of collective truth. Hunter talks about cultural exhaustion, a loss of faith, a rising nihilism — the belief in nothing. As he puts it, “If there is little or no common political ground today, it is because there are few if any common assumptions about the nature of a good society that underwrite a shared political life.”⁹
- Hunter argues that this trend has created our modern political crisis. It used to be that while you disagreed with your political opponent, you could still respect them. But now, politics is less about persuasion and more about us/them identity and the mechanics of power. In the words of David Brooks, summarizing Hunter: “If others are evil and out to get us, then persuasion is for suckers. If our beliefs are defined by our identities and not individual reason and personal experience, then different Americans are living in different universes, and there is no point in

⁷ A phrase attributed to Winston Churchill. “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

⁸ See Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (Basic Books, 2018).

⁹ James Davison Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis* (Yale University Press, 2024).

trying to engage in deliberative democracy. You just have to crush them. You have to grab power and control of the institutions and shove your answers down everybody else's throats."¹⁰

- Our society has shifted to a politics of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism imposes a social vision by force. If you can't have social solidarity organically from the ground up, then you can impose it from top down using the power of the state. This is threatening the very nature of our democracy. There are at least two major temptations of authoritarianism that are vying for Americans' devotion right now:
 - **Christian Nationalism:** Christian nationalism is the attempt to employ government power to enforce Christian hegemony with civil religion. In this situation, religious identity is merged with national identity in ways that compromise core Christian beliefs and undermine the values of a diverse, democratic society. We believe this is deeply unfaithful to our calling as Christians and that Christian nationalism should be vehemently resisted. Yes, Christians must seek to influence society, but the purpose is not the pursuit of power and hegemony, but faithful service expressed in humility, love and sacrifice. Christian nationalism is bad for everyone, including Christians. It distorts the gospel, prioritizing national interests over the teachings of Jesus, compromising the integrity of the gospel message and reducing Christianity to a tool for political power rather than a transformative spiritual path. It fosters an "us vs. them" mentality, leading to the exclusion of those who do not fit a particular nationalistic or religious mold. It can foster discrimination against religious minorities, immigrants, and others perceived as not aligning with the nation's "Christian identity." Christian nationalism often supports a particular political party or leader as the only legitimate representative of Christian values, undermining democratic principles like pluralism, freedom of expression, and separation of church and state. It diminishes the rights of people of other religions, it leads to a superficial Christianity rather than true discipleship, it produces political leaders who pretend to be religious to win the favor of the Christian masses, it uses our faith to justify unchristian policies, it lends itself to narratives of racial superiority, and threatens the multi-ethnic nature of the global church. Whenever the church has colluded with political power, the result has been the detriment of our faith.¹¹ To quote NT Wright, "Christian nationalism is impoverished as it seeks a kingdom without a cross. It pursues a victory without mercy. It acclaims God's love of power rather than the power of God's love."¹²
 - **Civic Totalism:** On the other side, there is an alternative form of authoritarianism that philosopher Stephen Macedo calls "civic totalism," when a state seeks to regulate as much of the individuals' beliefs, convictions, conscience and religion as possible.¹³ There

¹⁰ David Brooks, "The Deep Source of Trump's Appeal,"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/11/opinion/trump-biden-authoritarianism.html>

¹¹ For a great book outlining the dangers of Christian nationalism and our call to love those who have been captured by it, see Caleb Campbell, *Disarming Leviathan: Loving your Christian Nationalist Neighbor* (IVP, 2024).

¹² NT Wright, *Jesus and the Powers* (Zondervan, 2024).

¹³ Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

is a rising progressive post-liberal movement that does not value the right to dissent, the value of religious and ideological diversity, or the necessity of public debate. It is deeply formed by a hierarchy of identities, in which people are assigned the binary slots of either “oppressor” or “oppressed.” This results in an aggressive collectivism in which people are not treated as individuals before the law but as expressions of specific sexual, social and ethnic identities. Thus individual rights are subordinated to the objectives of the state. This inability to accept dissent and difference, the antipathy toward people of faith, a secular puritanism that seeks to “cancel” those who do not subscribe to the accepted new public morality, can all lead to an authoritarianism that could seriously hinder the freedom of the church and the flourishing of the gospel, not to mention undermining democracy.

- We believe that the American church should stand against both of these rising authoritarian movements. Against Christian nationalism, we must stand against political movements that take the name of Christ in vain through syncretistic blends of nationalism, white supremacy and civic religion, and instead we must seek to promote the way of Christian love, hospitality and peace. Against civic totalism, we refuse to forfeit our freedoms and to subordinate the rights of one identity over another, and instead advocate for the equality of everyone before the law as given through the Imago Dei (Gen 1:27).

3// THE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CHURCH

In light of our political crisis and the rising threats of authoritarianism, what opportunity is there for the church?

- As followers of Jesus, we have an opportunity before us to become those who help renew our society not through power or force but through a gospel-empowered neighbor love. That’s what this class is about. It’s not about how to win out our agenda but how, through everyday practices of love as worked out through our civic disciplines, we can become those who help renew the fabric of our society and to bear witness to God’s Kingdom.
- What does this mean exactly? We can be those who contribute to the flourishing of our democracy by helping to restore a sense of a shared story, and by modeling what debate and discourse look like that is not animated by power and manipulation. In other words, we can help revive healthy democracy. Luke Bretherton writes, “Christians do not need democracy to practice their faith, but democracy enshrines some central Christian commitments, and so, as a judgment of practical reason, democracy should be an aspirational feature of political order for Christians.”¹⁴ One way we can practice our faith (and protect it) is by resisting the authoritarian movements listed above and work to preserve a healthy, diverse, pluralistic democracy in which we, along with others, can freely practice and bear witness to our beliefs.
- A healthy democracy enables us to practice our faith freely and allows the gospel to flourish. But this also means us protecting and honoring the right for our neighbor to be different than we are, think differently than we do, and live differently than we do, all without fear of reprisal. In a modern secular pluralistic society like ours, Christians must seek ways to model unity in diversity,

¹⁴ Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Eerdmans, 2022).

practice hospitality and welcome, and faithfully contribute in everyday ways to the Kingdom of God. Christian sociologist John Inazu calls this “confident pluralism.” It’s a posture that allows for genuine differences to co-exist without suppressing or minimizing our firmly held convictions.¹⁵ This is a way we can love our neighbor and hold true to our faith.

- Our culture is no longer able to create people who can speak with both conviction and compassion across great differences, and so it is more imperative than ever for the church to produce such people. Too often, we see Christians modeling cruelty, prejudice and a fear-based alarmism that undercuts our witness and obscures the person of Jesus. The gospel enables us to become those who are deeply secure in our own beliefs and identity in Christ, while at the same time being deeply connected in love with our neighbors who are not like us or who believe differently than we do, without being afraid on the one hand or aggressive on the other. The gospel of Jesus can make us whole, peaceful, kind, and the very best neighbors and citizens. We can model kind and respectful debate and discourse, framed by humility and love.
- This is what this class is all about. We’ll spend each week covering 2 of the practices below, all with the hope that we can practice our faith in the public square in a way that contributes to civic renewal. This may not seem like much in light of all the forces around us, but Jesus said that his Kingdom grows through the tiniest ways!

May the Lord bless us and use us for the renewal of our civic life.

Rev. Corey J. Widmer, Ph.D.

Guiding Rules of Engagement

Given that politics can be such a contentious topic to discuss, and also considering how divisive and polarized our society is right now over these issues, it’s important that we commit to some basic ways of interaction with one another. We want this class to be conversational, but we also want to model in our conversations how we can promote love, respect and humility when having political conversations. Here are a few rules of engagement to guide us.

1. Listen well and seek to understand the other person’s point of view before stating your own.
2. Don’t make assumptions. Eg “All Christians believe this,” or “Everyone here is on the same page about x.” We are a politically diverse congregation and it’s better to be curious rather than assume.
3. Even if you think that you are on a completely different page than someone else, seek to listen and receive something. Everyone brings valuable insight to the conversation.
4. Practice confidentiality. Don’t share someone else’s story without permission.
5. Don’t cut anyone off and don’t dominate the conversation.

¹⁵ John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

6. Ask “what” questions versus “why” questions. “Why” questions can more easily come across as accusatory. “What” questions lend themselves to curiosity. For example, instead of saying, “Why do you think that?” you could say, “What factors or challenges in your life have influenced your political beliefs?”
7. Welcome feedback and correction. Work against defensive responses.
8. Keep in mind that this is hard work. We are focused on creating a productive space rather than creating a comfortable space.

Class Syllabus

August 25: Introduction

Sept 1: Disciplines 1 and 2

Discipline #1: See People, Not Political Abstractions

Christian Value: Human Dignity/Imago Dei

Scripture for Meditation: James 3:9-10 - With it (the tongue) we bless our Lord and Father, and with it, we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

Discipline #2: Be Aware of the Flaws on Your Side

Christian Value: Self-Examination

Scripture for Meditation: Psalm 139:23-24 - Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Sept 8: Disciples 3 and 4

Discipline #3: Identify the Virtue on the Other Side

Christian Values: Charity & Common Grace

Scripture for Meditation: Acts 17:26-27 - From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

Discipline #4: Practice Public Grace & Courtesy

Christian Values: Kindness & Self-Control

Scripture for Meditation: Matthew 5:46-48 - For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers,[i] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

September 15: Disciplines 5 and 6

Discipline #5: Exercise Media Hygiene

Christian Values: Wisdom & Understanding

Scripture for Meditation: James 1:19 - My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Discipline #6: Have An Affirmative Posture

Christian Values: Fruitfulness, Light

Scripture for Meditation: Micah 6:8 - He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

September 22: Disciplines 7 and 8

Discipline #7: Discern Partisan Talking Points

Christian Value: Discernment

Scripture for Meditation: Proverbs 14:15 - The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps.

Discipline #8: Pray For Your Political Opponents

Christian Value: Pray for your enemies

Scripture for Meditation: Matthew 5:43-44 - You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

September 29: Disciplines 9 and 10

Discipline #9: Get Involved

Christian Values: Self Sacrifice, Love, Stewardship

Scripture for Meditation: James 1:22 - Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Discipline #10: Commit To Move Forward Constructively

Christian Value: Perseverance, Peacemaking

Scripture for Meditation: 1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.