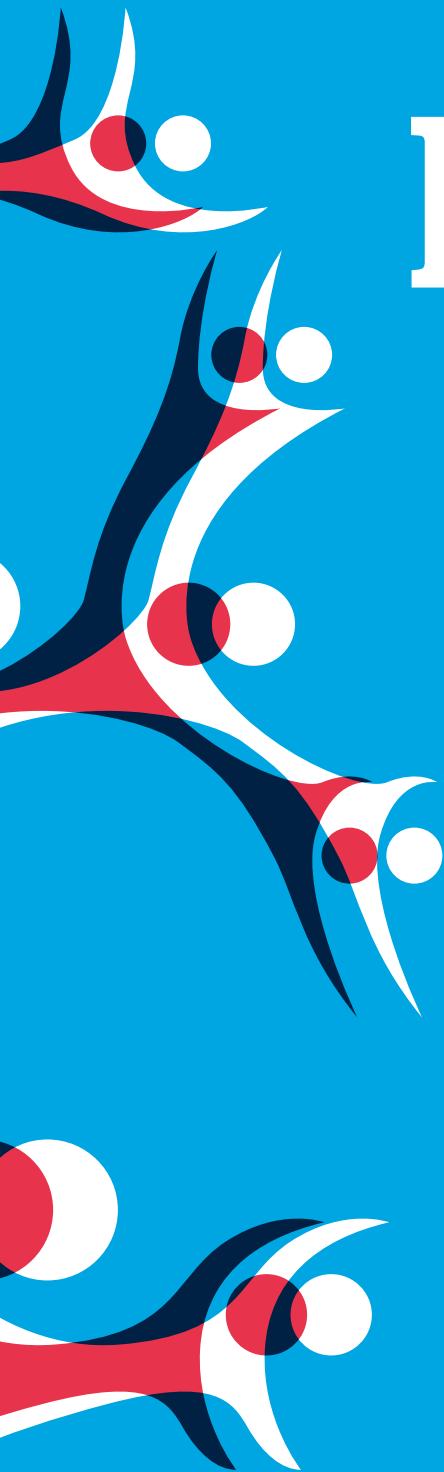


Preaching about politics

by Andy Flannagan

I have spent much of the last fifteen years preaching about politics. That doesn't mean I have always done it well. But I hope I have learned some things along the way that might just be useful.



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The title I have been given is important, as it is often a battle to make sure that we are actually *preaching* about politics. Too often as Christians we are just *talking* about politics – providing commentary on the Westminster soap opera. Our mantra at Christians in Politics has been ‘participate, don’t just commentate’ but we can only do that effectively if we have a firm grasp on the theological starting point for our participation and some fire in our bellies. And that often comes through preaching: not just pontificating and trying to decide God’s opinion on every subject. By that, I mean altar call type preaching – creating space to respond to the divine call to serve in the public square. That’s a call we should all answer in various ways, but we should also enable some to discover their specific vocation to stand as representatives.

MANDATE TO GOVERN

This call to governance and politics goes right back to the start. In Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in

number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’

And in Genesis 2:15:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

If we are made in his image, we govern because he governs. Theologians call this the creation mandate – we are made in the image of God, called to faithfully manifest that image in our daily work of stewarding his creation. We rule because we are like our Father. We can take it seriously, we can do it badly, or we can abdicate responsibility to others who may lack a biblical worldview. Of course stewarding creation goes beyond material things such as plants and animals, to concepts such as freedoms and institutions such as family. There is a cultural mandate to develop institutions for the common good.

These verses also make it clear that in this task, our relational priorities are governed by the fact that we are all endowed with equal worth and dignity. There are no premier league people: under God’s authority, this essential equality is the starting point for all human government.

GOD’S PRIMARY INSTRUCTIONS

So far so good, we know these things to be true. But we often miss when these verses occur.

In light of the fall, politics has often been seen as a ‘necessary evil’ to restrain evil, but this is verging on instrumentalism. This call to leadership and responsibility for the earth was given to humans *before* the fall. Organisation is still needed in the context of perfection. Throughout the rest of scripture, it is also clear that God has always intended to share his reign with us, and that we will do so even when evil is no more. So 2

Timothy 2:11-12 says ‘If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.’

Our present stewardship finds its context more fully in light of the future perfection. We will reign with him as a ‘kingdom of priests’, with kingly and priestly roles combined – no more secular/sacred divide. What a future! What we are involved in is not just useful now, but a fascinating apprenticeship for that future.

LOVING OUR NEIGHBOURS

Preaching politics is not just another area of life that Christians should cover. It is hugely important. We preach politically because Jesus did. Over the last ten years, I have often heard people say, ‘Those politicians – they’re all the same. They haven’t a clue about what’s going on out here in the real world. Politics does nothing for me. Why should I give them my vote? They don’t care about me.’

I have some sympathy for this view, given the way the media covers politics. But my answer to these statements is to ask, ‘Do you care about your neighbourhood?’ If not, I probably won’t be able to convince you otherwise. But if you do care, then you do care about politics. You perhaps just don’t know it yet.

Jesus said, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ So we need to love others in the way that we love ourselves. But how do we love ourselves? We love ourselves by a huge variety of mental, physical and spiritual attitudes and practices. We feed ourselves. We clothe ourselves. We communicate with others. We find jobs and somewhere to live. We organise diaries. We find love. We connect with God. Yet even these basic things are not true for everyone.

Loving our neighbour ‘as ourselves’ must therefore mean caring about all these aspects of their lives. It doesn’t get much more complicated than that. You cannot divorce the personal from the social, economic, cultural

and political environments in which we live. They have a huge influence on us, and to address personal needs without addressing the context in which a life sits makes little sense and can lead to a lot of frustration.

There was a 78-year-old lady on our block called Marie. The life she lived is replicated all over the UK. Visualise an elderly person who you know well and ask yourself these questions, inserting your friend's name. Do you care that Marie's bins are collected? Or her local hospital has the drugs she needs? That her bedroom is damp? And so on. If so, if you care about people, you care about politics.

FOLLOWING JESUS

Even if we agree we want to preach like Jesus we sometimes hide behind him, wrongly believing that he wasn't political. We forget that his challenges to the status quo were innately political, as in his day the religious leaders were also the political leaders. Mary seems pretty clear from her song in Luke 1 that her Son is going to be bringing down the mighty from their thrones and turning the world upside down. Just a little political.

You may say that Jesus was political but not actually a politician, so we should steer away from party politics. To that I would say that Jesus wasn't an airline pilot, or an accountant

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either, but we'd probably agree Christians should be in those roles. Or are we seriously restricting the only Christian career path to carpentry?

SO WHAT SHOULD PREACHERS DO?

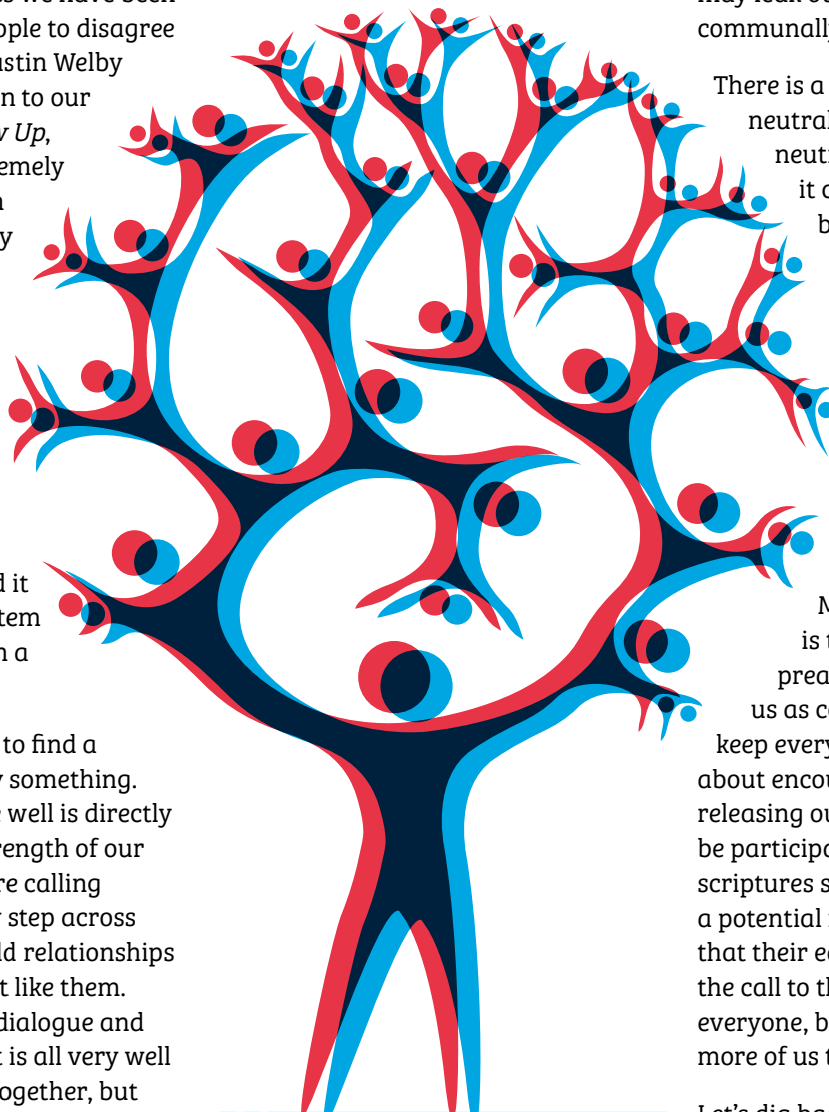
Now don't get me wrong. I understand that a church leader often feels like they walk a tightrope when they are preaching about politics, especially in the era of Brexit. There is a fear of division and nobody wants to say anything that might bring any more angst into an already troubled situation.

At Christians in Politics we have been clear about calling people to disagree well. As Archbishop Justin Welby said in the introduction to our book, *Those Who Show Up*, 'Politics would be extremely dull if we all agreed on everything. There is joy in diversity, and we should not be afraid to disagree with one another, but in a way that models the reconciling love of Jesus. Good disagreement is a gift that the church can offer the world around it – and our political system could certainly do with a healthy dose of it.'

But our call is not just to find a more polite way to say something. Our ability to disagree well is directly proportional to the strength of our relationships. So we are calling people to intentionally step across cultural divides to build relationships with those who are not like them. Only then can honest dialogue and reconciliation occur. It is all very well to talk about coming together, but how do we come together if we never meet? There is a cultural divide in the UK, exposed more fully by the Brexit vote, but there is danger of cultural chasm forming, akin to the USA. Our preaching must call us to be practical peacemakers as well as debating the finer points of theology and policy.

POSITIVE DISAGREEMENT

Leaders can model good disagreement rather than running away from it. Why not have two or three people with different views do a sermon on politics? Get them to prepare together. But make sure it is a sermon, not a Christian version of *Question Time*. Make sure it starts in scripture and it has heart. The team approach also removes the focus from the individual leader who may not want to share their political beliefs.



may leak out in ways that are not so communally helpful.

There is a difference between neutrality and silence. If neutrality is what you seek, it can be achieved through balance and dialogue. Silence perpetuates a secular/sacred divide and leaves the church sorting out the pastoral problems but stepping back from our prophetic role.

PARTICIPATION

My final encouragement is to reaffirm that our preaching will be less about us as commentators trying to keep everyone happy but more about encouraging and missionally releasing our church members to be participants. We can open the scriptures so they can see politics as a potential mission field, and pray that their ears would be open to hear the call to that mission. It won't be for everyone, but it should surely be for more of us than it is at present.

Let's dig back into scripture and see again how fundamentally political it is. And let's boldly grapple with some of the challenges of preaching politics; to the powers that be, to vested corporate interests, to authoritarian liberalism and to our own complacency. Our silence cannot continue.

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OPENNESS

The fear of causing offence or, if we're honest, the fear of giving ourselves headaches as leaders often sadly leads to silence. We find it is better in the long run for preachers to be open about their political passions and allow them to be honestly interrogated. Otherwise viewpoints

Find resources to help with preaching on politics on the Christians in Politics website christiansinpolitics.org.uk and in the book *Those Who Show Up*.

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