

Sex, Politics, and Religion Series  
St John's Men's Forum, 2013-2014  
Session 14, February 13

**The Gospel and the Ballot Booth, or  
The Dr Dcn Goes to Washington**  
**(Christian Judgment Navigating American Politics)**  
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1. All Under the Gospel

What we're trying to do is give you the principles by which to make good judgments in any and all situations... for the most part, it's up to you to bridge that gap. we can't spoon feed you with case studies and situational ethics.

A few weeks ago, Fr Dunbar began this two-part presentation on politics by putting certain fundamental perspectives and commitments in place. Most important: There is nowhere that the authority of God's Spirit and Word does not run—all authority is God's authority. And whether we see it or not, the truth is that those in positions of power have been put there by God for our benefit. So we have a duty to obey those in authority, except when it would contradict our obedience to God.

The authority of God also extends, of course, to the individual Christian citizen as well, and it is clear that Christians do not have the 'luxury' of keeping their faith private and unrelated to their political lives. Indeed, there is a danger in *not* talking about politics... for then things run amuck, and the Christian mind is vague in its thinking and without foundation. And avoiding the topic of politics is, in fact, a tacit denial of Christ's Lordship of that sphere.

Here I take up the baton, and hope to give us some perspective on the American scene, and get a few pointers in how a Christian might want to engage in American politics *as* a Christian!

- First things first: Christian faith, hope, and love can thrive in any political and economic condition, so let's not confuse the earthly and heavenly goods. I've heard compelling and beautiful stories of Russian priests ministering in the gulags of Siberia in early Soviet Russia... "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10.28).
- Xian faith like the North Star for sailors in an unpredictable stormy sea, a GPS for a pilot flying in cloudy and bumpy skies. Fly by instruments. Even when the weather is clear.

So, how *does* a traditional Christian engage in American politics?

First, we need to step back and get the whole in view.

2. American Legacy and its Ambiguities

- a. founding consensus of rule of law, and common pursuit of truth to maximize freedom

- balanced powers, checks & balances designed to maintain stability and ensure rule of law
  - problem with a democracy is, who writes the laws? What are their beliefs about human well-being and freedom? What is their character? Our system of government simply reflects the mind of the people: the Constitution is more a method than a doctrine. Laws are passed by a majority and signed by the President... all of whom can be wrong, in concert.
  - St Augustine once wisely suggested that humans may indeed come together in societies and lend their collective authority to a particular version of the truth, but their understanding very often arises not out of common intuition of the truth, but merely out of their agreement with one another; in other words, pooling their ignorance and concupiscence, and in such cases their authority comes not from God but merely from themselves. (*doc. Chr.* III.5f)
- Founders were not naïve to this general truth, and assumed a religious soul, as necessary virtue to guide public life
- the private life of religion was meant to guide the public life of her citizens and statesmen
- Hear George Washington on this very matter, in his Farewell Address of 1796  
“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?”

- And hear President John Adams in 1798, in his address to a militia in Mass:  
“While our country remains untainted with the principles and manners which are now producing desolation in so many parts of the world; while she continues sincere, and incapable of insidious and impious policy, we shall have the strongest reason to rejoice in the local destination assigned us by Providence. But should the people of America once become capable of that deep simulation towards one another, and towards foreign nations, which assumes the language of justice and moderation while it is practising iniquity and extravagance, and displays in the most captivating manner the charming pictures of candor, frankness, and sincerity, while it is rioting in rapine and insolence, this country will be the most miserable habitation in the world; because we have no

government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

- The Founding Fathers of our nation saw rightly that there were only two things that stood in the way of this grand experiment from flying off the rails: Divine Providence, and human virtue.

BUT...

b. problem of no established religion: ambiguity in truth and virtue

- whose version of God? and which vision of virtue?
- it's often said that the USA is a Christian nation... which is *sort of* true. As I told someone the other day, I don't see any reference to Christ or the Cross in our founding documents. Rather, our republic was borne out of certain Enlightenment ideals, which are very compatible with Christianity in their ideals of freedom and fairness and the rule of law.
- Declaration of Independence has vague statements related to God:
- “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed”
- “for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”
- in fact, once upon a time the Kings of England and others claimed to rule by Divine Right, that Kings derived their just power from the consent of God, irrespective of the consent of the governed
- in Europe lots of people died over the very question of religious definition... its political importance is undeniable.
- the American refusal to commit to any particular doctrine or understanding of the truth or virtue means that we simply don't have an official doctrine or understanding of the truth!
- What this does is it creates a public space for the churches and private citizens to voice their views and hammer out justice and good order the best we can
- This is especially a problem when there begin to be real differences in opinion on the very important questions of truth and virtue. Washington once observed that for almost all Americans, even with “slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles.” This commonality was the foundation of our political unity. This is fine when you're mixing Anglicans, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Quakers, etc. It even works well with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, etc who are willing to embrace our Enlightenment ideals of tolerance and freedom, and its generally Protestant soul
- But G. Washington's ideal of a common American mind with only “slight shades of difference” becomes more and more strained with the introduction of atheism

and a liberal sort of Christianity which is hostile to the older ways of thinking, America's original, tacitly Protestant religious culture

- c. the functioning of American politics depends on a dialectic, and noble pragmatism
- this ambiguity is both a weakness and a strength
  - we're meant to debate important questions... for this to work, it requires loads of good faith and patience with one another. And it requires reaching consensus on justice and the public good; the process is one of shared discernment of the truth
  - this depends on the admittedly diminished character of our cultural unity: a common sense of the public good, and a strong dedication to realizing it
  - has worked pretty well for a long time... as our nation's stability and prosperity testify
  - but there is a very real danger when there are competing minds without charity, and without deference to the will of the majority and a healthy respect for the concerns of the minority or dissenting view, things can break down in dysfunction, as we're seeing more and more
  - but more likely than this being the end, seems to me the mind/culture of the American people will move forward with a common mind of one sort or another... the friction we experience along the way will be from the protests of the minorities, some old, some new, esp as the mind of the majority evolves

### 3. *This* Xian Voting under the Gospel

- this is our system as I see it; So how do we, as traditional Christians, operate in this environment?
- I would suggest that we are witnessing a drifting of the American mind, which doesn't seem to be too interested in the apostolic mind of Christ, the culture of the Kingdom of God
- The more the culture drifts, the more we traditionalists will stick out... kind of like those rock formations in the desert or the sea shore which remain after the softer soil erodes away
- And even if we agree very little with the prevailing opinion on very many matters, even unbelievers can have a certain fundamental appreciation for the American ideals of justice, equity, freedom, etc.
- Our job is to find common ground where possible, and to speak out as prophets among our people when common ground can't be found... A large part of our job is to clarify our differences with others, to ensure that all options are on the table. this is our contribution to the American mind in its search for truth, justice, and freedom. As Fr Dunbar said, speaking the truth is our fundamental political act, our contribution. And our voice is guaranteed protection by the Constitution, and this guarantee is in place because of the American commitment to Providence and the ability of men to appreciate the truth, even if incompletely or in distorted form.
- I can't give you talking points or a voting scheme—to do so would be insulting and degrading... and downright un-American! (ideally)
- but I can give you a peek into my own thought-processes

- this is a gift bigger than my opinion on innumerable specific issues, as you can use my example as an opportunity to reflect for yourself on how our faith will inform your judgment in navigating the American political landscape

### **Jeremy under the Gospel**

what convictions inform my attitude and posture re: political affairs:

1. my goal is heaven, through Christ—no earthly city will do. This allows me a certain amount of dispassion when it comes to earthly affairs. My treasure is in heaven, and no tax or crisis can touch it.
2. my virtue flows from my faith—on a good day, the Xian is the best sort of citizen. The greater my faith, hope, and love, the more ‘reasonable’ and objective I become regarding the public good, and the more other reasonable men will be attracted to my Christian vision of the truth, and come to agree with me
3. my mind is blinded by sin, and my judgment clouded—demands humility for myself, patience for others... There is almost always at least a germ of truth in the position of others, something that I’m missing and need to take on board. Listening to one’s opponents doesn’t necessarily mean capitulation or agreement... but it’s always a chance to learn and search out our own oversights or weaknesses in our thinking.

### **Jeremy in the Republic (or, the Dr Dcn Goes to Washington)**

- re: the earthly city, I long to see:
- order, justice (protection of innocent and punishment of wrongdoing), peace, good faith in public discourse
- the gospel demands that I promote these things, especially for the best conditions for the proclamation of the Gospel; the law of charity contained within the Gospel also demands that I advocate for certain conditions of human life: freedom to worship and proclaim the truth, the social responsibility of all, protection of the defenseless and weak (disabled, ill, infirm, unborn, elderly), true equity for all (courts *and* markets), and the plight of the poor
- both our political parties are clearly deficient in various ways... America’s ambiguities persist, and the party spirit that so many of the Founding Fathers deplored thrives
- both parties have some virtues, both are limited and corrupted in varying degrees and ways
- Politics of the Possible
- toleration of vice by necessity: Lincoln in Peoria, 1854, founding fathers’ attitude towards slavery: “The plain unmistakable spirit of that age was hostility to the PRINCIPLE, and toleration, ONLY BY NECESSITY.” <http://ashbrook.org/publications/onprin-feb2009-portteus/>
- vote in an informed manner, doing the best we can with the hand we’ve been dealt
- speak the truth in public, in a calm, reasonable, yet earnest fashion. Remember, our treasure is in heaven, not the Republic. A certain level of detachment is healthy for you, and compelling to them.
- that’s our contribution: proclaiming good order here on earth, according to a particular version of the truth and virtue

- How Christ did it is how I want to do it: he testified to the truth that wasn't of this world
- great Christians of the ancient world preached the truth boldly, risking their lives in conflicts with Emperors and Kings, and unafraid to offend the rich by proclaiming their *Christian* responsibility to the poor
- in their love of God and humanity Christians are both unafraid to *challenge* the establishment, and unafraid to *defend* it
  
- our job is to push the parties and individuals past their particular limitations to a more perfect version of the truth, to help them transcend their self-interest (vice) and pursue instead Christian virtue... Indeed, our Elliott House speaker helpfully pointed us to Blaise Pascal's conviction that the entire world largely ran on vice... I would suggest our job is to help it rise above merely passionate living to a life based on love of the truth

But above all...

- The best way to participate in our nation's looks beyond the ballot box or debate, to include the life of virtue and the proclamation of the truth "not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days"
- voting responsibly is an obvious exercise of political influence... but even more power and influence to change our political life for the better is through the exercise of Christian virtue in the public square, and working quietly for the conversion of the hearts and minds around us. Christian citizenship begins with our parenting and our professional careers and general presence in the community
- this is true power, and demands a profound level of integrity and zeal if it will be of effect. Publishing our opinions and shouting and rewarding politicians with our vote are some forms of power we possess, though not very impressive ones... A quiet life of virtue is exponentially more influential
- voting is an action which flows from the heart... change hearts, change the vote. And be open to your own heart becoming refined in the process, in its openness primarily to God, but also to the other