

Series: The Elephant in the Room
Part 6: Activist: how to become politically engaged without becoming partisan
Jeff Kennedy / May 22nd, 2016

Today's Key Passage: Acts 17:16-34

Two extremes to avoid

- Fanatical _____
- Fearful _____

1. We are called to be _____ - _____ and _____ - _____.
Acts 17:16ff

2. We are _____ servants not a _____ class.
Acts 17:18; Phil. 3:10ff.

3. We are in a spiritual _____ not a cultural _____.
Acts 17:21; Eph. 6:12; Scripture: 2 Thess. 2:5-6, 13; Romans 13:1

- Engage the spiritual _____ in control of _____ authorities.
- A restraining _____ not a _____ force.
- Submit to _____.

4. We must rest in the knowledge that God is _____.
Acts 17:26-27

Today's Takeaways:

Introduction: The effects of Christianity on the course of human history, in particular American History, are undeniable in my view. The late Dr. James Kennedy once advocated Christian Activism noting that Christian motives and doctrines have largely transformed western culture in such areas as:

- Help for the poor
- The abolition of slavery
- Teaching of literacy
- Education for all
- Political freedom
- Economic freedom
- Science and medicine
- The family
- The arts
- The sanctity of life.

Without Jesus, without his Gospel, without the influence of his people, all these areas of culture would be very different and very much worse off.

And there are two extremes, in my view, that we need to avoid today:

- 1) **Fanatical Activism** (at the expense of our witness to a dying world)
- 2) **Fearful Isolationism** (at the expense of being salt and light in a dark and vulgar world).

So what is the balance? Or rather, what should we hold in tension here?

Thesis: As followers of Jesus, we should be politically engaged without becoming overzealous and morphing the Gospel into a message of mere conservative social activism.

But Here's the Problem with that statement: Political Activism isn't in the Bible. Not a single case in Scripture where Old Testament or New Testament saints are encouraged to protest, petition, or vote their Christian consciences. This is where we need to learn the principle of what the Bible records vs. what it approves. The Bible doesn't always approve of everything it records (e.g. the words of Satan). And the Bible doesn't always record what it, in principle, approves (e.g. the use of modern church buildings, PA systems, plastic communion cups and political engagement). The question is "does the NT forbid political activism? Or does it permit it?"

A Deeper Problem: Here's one reason why political activism isn't in the Bible. Democracy really wasn't an option for them. It was expected that they would have to live within the laws of their land, and the laws of their land were determined by a hierarchical government—not the will of the people.

The only environments where any form of democracy could be practiced was in the “voluntary associations” within Greco-Roman culture: Burial, Business/Market, Philosophical societies, or House/Home ownership societies. So long as a group met under the cover of these voluntary associations—groups were “protected” or enjoyed legitimacy. But the decision making process about government policy only extended to the elites, and among those the elites of the elites.

With regards to religion, you either had “religio licita” or “religio illicita” status—and that was determined by: 1) longevity (being around a long time and having the cover of antiquity. 2) Peacefulness and syncretization (you couldn’t claim your religious leader was a “new King” or the “King of Kings” or “Lord”—those were the titles of Caesars and it was illegal to have a leader with Caesar’s titles. 3)

So the Gospel community of the first century was a persecuted sect, vying for legal status in Rome. Had no social, civil, or political rights and was completely subject to the governing authorities.

Here are some guiding principles to political engagement that we all need to keep in mind.

First we must realize that...

1. We are called to be bridge-builders and cross-bearers. We build bridges into our community and our world and bear the shame, the stigma of the cross of Jesus. We are, by definition, a persecuted sect—a fellowship of the suffering. The NT never anticipates that our influence will be so overwhelming that we can somehow legislate a Christian worldview on a godless nation or culture.

We are called to build bridges and carry the cross.

- We build bridges as we listen and engage in dialogue.
- **Scripture:** Acts 17:16ff Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.¹⁷ So he **reasoned** (*dialegomai*) in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

Now, notice what Paul is doing with both the devout Jews, the followers of Greek philosophy—he’s reasoning with them. This word “reason” is *dialegomai* where we get the word “dialogue” and that’s just what it meant in Greek culture.

Illus. “Aliens, man!”

- We bear crosses as we share the unchanging truth, boldly proclaiming and inviting people to come to faith in Jesus for salvation.
 - We preach the Gospel message
 - We live Gospel principles
 - We advocate for Gospel values

It is quite impossible for us to dialogue with anyone when we are shouting at each other, or picketing and protesting each other. I don't find anywhere in Scripture where we're commanded or commended to protest those who disagree with us. I don't find anywhere in the text where Paul did this with those whom he disagreed with. Instead we are to build a bridge—dialoguing, making our case, listening to people who disagree with us, and then responding in kindness.

You and I will do 100x more for the cause of the Gospel if we sit down with an individual who disagrees with us and dialogue—making our case in a kind, Christlike fashion, genuinely listening, and then agreeing to disagree—than we ever would picketing and protesting our culture.

This is how we become bridge-builders and cross bearers. Leading to our next observation from the text...

Second, we must realize that...

2. We are suffering servants not a privileged class. The biblical authors expected that believers would suffer persecution.

Scripture: Acts 17:18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbling wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

As the Greek philosophers listen to Paul they are immediately skeptical—calling him a babbling, misunderstanding his message and mission.

And a lot worse happens to him both in this text and the cities to come. As Paul travels into cities like this, he is beaten and left for dead, he is chased and threatened and jailed and nearly trampled in riots—he faces dangers in the city, in the country, on the sea and on land.

And not one bit of this is an injustice or is news to God. Here's what Paul said was the goal of his life...

Scripture: Phil. 3:8-11 “More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul stated in Phil. 3 that the driving force and motivation of his life was to: 1) know Christ, 2) the power of his resurrection 3) and the fellowship of his suffering, becoming like him in his death. And how was Christ in his death? A lamb before the slaughter. That's how.

We are not a privileged class of people, I don't care how popular Christianity has ever been in America. We are followers of God's suffering lamb and so long as we follow him, we will be treated like him. Jesus said, "The servant is not greater than the Master. If they hated me, they will hate you."

Suffering and persecution of the faithful is normal not abnormal.

Next, we must remember that...

3. We are in a spiritual battle not a cultural war.

Immediately we see that Paul addresses the rampant idolatry in Athens. Athens in particular was renown for its statues to various deities—often viewed by the locals as gorgeous works of art, but also revered as an earthly representation of Olympus where the gods dwelled.

Scripture: Acts 17:21 "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you..."

Paul's first priority in his Gospel presentation is to address the problem: their idolatry—and it turns out, as Paul teaches, that these are no gods at all. Because there are no other gods. But there are evil spirits—demons behind these idols and when people worship them they are honoring these fallen angels and are inviting their control and oppression over the culture.

We wage this spiritual war as we...

- **Engage the spiritual forces in control of governing authorities.**

Scripture: Eph. 6:12 "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Paul's primary answer to the spiritual forces of darkness—the drivers of our cultural ideology—is spiritual battle. And if you look at his famous "armor of God" passage in Eph 6, it's easy to see that this spiritual war is not para-normal, and it is not carnal or purely natural—it's spiritual. As those who are saved guard their minds and hearts, prepare themselves/grounded in the Gospel, live by faith and stand our ground with God's truth and prayer for all and bold proclamation to the world—as we do this we wage a spiritual battle for the souls of men. This is our primary calling. Because when we save a soul we affect the culture one person at a time. That's our highest priority.

The Spiritual warfare we engage in is for the souls of lost people. And we have no fight until we engage in *this fight*. We are called, not only to attend prayer rallies, but to pray "on all occasions," in every circumstance, in every facet of life.

We engage the spiritual battle by realizing that we...

- **A restraining agent not a sanctifying force.**

Scripture: 2 Thess. 2:5-6, 13: Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? ⁶ And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed.

God has sanctified and is sanctifying (setting apart as holy) the Church—but we are not sanctifying the culture. We are proclaiming Christ and restraining a godless culture from total moral oblivion. Christian Activism doesn't have a high bar of success. Meaning, our main goal is not the complete transformation of society into a "Christianized" culture—that is just an unrealistic expectation. I think the Scriptures teach that this will only happen when Christ returns to reclaim all nations as their sovereign Lord—but **a stabilizing conscience**—a **restraining force**. Here's why the restraining force is so necessary:

- **It keeps civilizations from imploding through cultural decay.** It keeps us from moral oblivion. Your conscience cannot save you for eternity, but it can save you from very poor choices that will keep you out of prison and alive long enough to hear the Gospel message.
- **It preserves society in anticipation of a powerful move of God.** Now sometimes in history we have seen a mass revival after periods of darkness (the first great awakening, the second great awakening, and the third—the evangelical century). However, each of those mass awakenings were preceded by decades of intense darkness.

More often than not, the Church is a restraining force which is why we are to be active in proclaiming the truth, voting our values, and being engaged in the political process. It's not either or. We can and should do both.

No amount of political activism is going to Christianize or sanctify our culture. We can only hope to restrain it to varying degrees until Christ removes this restraining influence and "the man of lawlessness" under the influence of Satan will unleash moral chaos.

We wage spiritual warfare as we...

- **Submit to governing authorities.**

Scripture: **Romans 13:1** “Let every person be subject to the **governing** authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval

We have a unique situation in history. Ancient cultures did not have the right to vote or cast a ballot for leaders. You and I do. But ultimately, if your candidate doesn't end up in office, we are to be kind, to pray for them, to speak our minds and to yield to the laws of the land.

- We are to pray for them.
- We are to pay our taxes and submit to the laws of the land
- We are to persuade them through thoughtful and kind speech and advocacy.

So let's get specific: If we're posting snarky memes on facebook about Obama or Clinton or Trump on a daily basis, we are not merely protesting, we are sinning. That's not the way of Christ.

I don't want to demonize these people, I want to have a dialogue with them. I want to make my case, listen to their objections, respond kindly and pray for the hidden war going on behind the scenes, the battle for their souls.

Fourth, we must understand that...

4. God is still sovereign and in control. Ultimately the nations will bend to his will. Ultimately they will, regardless of the particular twists and turns they take along the way, go in the direction of God's sovereign plan.

Scripture: Acts 17:26 “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling places”

Paul reminded the Greek philosophers at Areopagus lecture hall that the God of the universe was running the show in the hopes that men would seek him and repent.

Two things about God's Sovereignty:

- 1) This means that God is ultimately free to choose the destiny and the direction of the nations. God is sovereign over the affairs of humankind.
- 2) Sovereignty does not negate or cancel out personal responsibility. God has sovereignly chosen to use our prayers, our efforts, our preaching and living to advance the Gospel cause.
 - We proclaim the Gospel every time we preach it.
 - We proclaim the Gospel every time we live it.
 - We proclaim the Gospel every time we vote and advocate for Gospel values.

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Summary: This is why mass hysteria is entirely out of place for Christ's disciples. God hasn't taken his hand off the wheel.

- He was in control when Babylon conquered Jerusalem and it looked like the end for God's people.
- He was in control when the Greeks conquered the world and Hellenized it with idolatry and the Greek language.
- He was in control when Rome ruled with a "divine" king/Caesar who persecuted the church near extinction and drove them into hiding in tombs and catacombs.

And he is on the throne now. God has allowed the nations to unfold in the times, the places, the circumstances in which they have—in the hope that some will seek him—though he isn't far from us.

As we become active and engaged in our culture, we can also rest in God's sovereignty to allow things to unfold as they are. And we don't have to be alarmed, we don't have to retreat, and we don't have to yield to ungodly panic.

Takeaways:

- Proclaim the Gospel message—as you tell your story: to a neighbor, a coworker—over dinner or coffee. Find a way to share your story of salvation and life transformation.
- Live the Gospel principles—be that Christian that nobody doubts for one second is follower of Christ—because you've shown them a life touched by the power of Grace.
- Vote Gospel values—advocate for your values through voting, by signing petitions, by engaging the culture through the channels provided for us and furnished by our constitution.
- Be prepared to suffer for Christ if the culture doesn't go your way—it is the lot of all who bear his name.

You can go on our website and find great resources for this if you're interested.

At the end of the day you and I are called to engage the culture as a counter-cultural community of faith. We will proclaim this message as suffering servants. Proclaim this message in the language of the receiving culture, as we become better listeners, better bridge builders and better cross bearers.