**Permission for Pastors to Preach about Politics**

Wayne Grudem

September 21, 2020

 If you’re a pastor during this election season, the easy path is to say nothing about politics. You won’t step on anybody’s toes. Nobody will walk out in the middle of your sermon. You won’t lose disgruntled members (and donors!). A few people might ask you to say more about politics, and they will grumble, but they won’t leave the church. You’re safe.

 But does God want you to stay silent at this time?

 I can’t answer that for you. It’s between you and God whether you preach about any political issues at all, and, if you do, which issues you decide to preach about. But I can make some observations that I think will give you a sense of permission (not from me, but from the Bible) to preach about at least some key political issues.

Whether you are a Trump supporter or a Biden supporter or somewhere in between, I intend my first seven points to apply to you, because I believe a democracy is healthy when differing views are expressed thoughtfully and carefully. My last three points will be based on my own preferences in this election.

**1. Your listeners need to see that the Bible speaks to all of life, including politics.**

 “Whether you eat or drink,” says Paul, “or whatever you do, *do all to the glory of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:31). But can we do *politics* to the glory of God? Of course, because politics must be included in the phrase “whatever you do.”

 Paul also says that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for . . . training in righteousness,” so that we may be “complete, equipped for *every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Surely voting in an election is part of “every good work” that God wants us to do, and that gives a reason why we should expect Scripture to be “profitable for . . . training” in what kinds of candidates and policies we should support.

But if a pastor goes through an entire election season and gives no teaching about the Bible’s application to political questions, he will be acting as if the Bible is irrelevant to political questions. Then how will his listeners ever think that the Bible is relevant for all of life?

In addition, many modern political issues were *moral issues* that the Bible talked about long before they became political issues in modern society – such as freedom of religion, abortion, sexuality, care for the poor, and racial discrimination. Should pastors not preach about such moral issues when they have implications for politics?

**2. God cares about secular governments and their leaders**

 I decided to search out whether the Bible ever recorded some examples in which God’s people (those who were genuine believers) had a good influence, not just on the nation of Israel, but *on secular governments* outside of Israel. Does God care about secular governments and their leaders? I found much more than I expected.

 For example, Joseph was the highest official after Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and had great influence in the decisions of Pharaoh (see Gen. 41:37–45; 42:6; 45:8–9, 26). Daniel was a high official in King Nebuchadnezzar’s court. He was “ruler over the whole province of Babylon” and “chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon” (Dan. 2:48). He was regularly “at the king’s court” (v. 49). And he gave moral instruction to the king:

“Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity” (Dan. 4:27).

 I found more examples than these. Nehemiah was “cupbearer to the king” (Neh. 1:11), a position of high responsibility before King Artaxerxes of Persia. Mordecai “was second in rank to King Ahasuerus” of Persia (Esth. 10:3; see also 9:4). Queen Esther also had significant influence on the decisions of Ahasuerus, risking her very life in order to save the Jewish people from destruction (see Esth. 5:1–8; 7:1–6; 8:3–13; 9:12–15, 29–32).

The Bible doesn’t merely say that these things *happened*, but the narrative texts view these events in a positive light, for they regularly record this influence on secular governments as a result of *God’s favor* toward his people and as a measure of blessing to those governments. This reminds us of God’s promise to Abraham that “in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18).

 I realize that these examples are not exactly the same as a pastor preaching about politics today, but there are similarities. In the ancient world, giving advice and guidance to the king was the way to bring about beneficial political policies. In modern democracies, voting, and giving guidance to others who vote, is the way to bring about beneficial political policies.

 The New Testament provides two additional examples: John the Baptist rebuked the Roman ruler Herod “for *all the evil things that Herod had done*” (Luke 3:19), which certainly must have included not only privately known sins but also publicly known governing decisions.

 Another possible example is the apostle Paul. While Paul was in prison in Caesarea, he stood trial before the Roman governor Felix:

[Felix] sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as *he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment*, Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you” (Acts 24:24–25).

The fact that Felix was “alarmed” and that Paul reasoned with him about “righteousness” and “the coming judgment” indicates that Paul was telling Felix that he would be accountable for his actions at “the coming judgment.” When the book of Acts tells us that Paul “reasoned” with Felix, the word (present participle of Greek *dialegomai*) indicates a back-and-forth conversation or discussion. We cannot be sure what they discussed, but it is very possible that Felix asked Paul, “What about this decision that I made? What about this policy? What about this ruling?” I cannot be sure about this, but at least we can say that Paul was discussing substantive issues with Felix, which may have included governmental decisions, and in that way Paul would have been “preaching about politics” to a Roman governor.

**3. Preaching “the whole counsel of God” will include preaching about civil government**

 Paul’s ministry also provides a good pattern for pastors to follow today: not merely preaching on our favorite passages of Scripture, but faithfully preaching about everything that the Bible teaches. Paul told the church leaders at Ephesus that he had been faithful in teaching them “the whole counsel of God”:

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you *the whole counsel of God*. (Acts 20:26-27)

 I hope I will be able to say that to the thousands of students I have taught in 43 years as a professor of theology: “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). But surely that must include some teaching about politics.

The New Testament has two passages that specifically address the responsibilities of civil governments (Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-14) and several other verses with implications for government (such as Matthew 22:21 and 1 Timothy 2:1-3). The Old Testament contains many details about the actions of good and evil kings. The words “king” and “kings” occur 112 times in Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes alone, and “ruler/rulers” is found another 20 times.

 Therefore, if a pastor feels a responsibility for declaring “the whole counsel of God” to his people, he will have to do *some* teaching on biblical principles regarding civil government. And what better time to do that than in the middle of an election season when questions about good and bad governmental policies are on everybody’s mind?

**4. Pastors throughout history have preached about politics**

 Historian Alvin Schmidt, in his book, *How Christianity Changed the World*, points out that the spread of Christian influence on government was primarily responsible for outlawing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire (in AD 374); granting of property rights and other protections to women throughout history; prohibiting the burning alive of widows along with their dead husbands in India (in 1829); and outlawing the painful and crippling practice of binding young women’s feet in China (in 1912). These reforms all required changes in a country’s laws, which is a political process that could not have happened unless numerous pastors had been teaching government officials and those who influenced them about the evils of these practices (that is, preaching about politics).

 In the years leading up to the American War of Independence, many pastors were preaching that resistance to tyranny (that is, resistance to the reign of King George III of England) was a morally good action, while a minority of pastors disagreed, urging continued submission to the British. But the point is that both sides were preaching about the possibility of independence from Britain, which was both a moral issue and the most crucial political issue of the day. In 1750, Boston pastor Jonathan Mayhew delivered one of the most influential sermons in American history, “A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission,” in which he defended the moral goodness of seeking freedom from British tyranny. His sermon was reprinted and widely distributed throughout the American colonies.

Later, pastors played a major role in the struggle against slavery. In fact, two-thirds of the leading American abolitionists in the mid–1830s were Christian clergymen who were preaching “politics” from the pulpit, saying that slavery should be abolished.

 And in the 1960s, the American civil rights movement that resulted in the outlawing of racial segregation and discrimination was led by Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist pastor who dared to preach about such “political” issues (which were, in actuality, also deeply *moral* issues).

**5. It’s not against the law to preach about political issues**

 It is a widespread myth that churches will lose their tax-exempt status if the pastor begins to speak about political issues. That is not true.

 In 1954, the IRS code was amended to prohibit pastors or churches from explicitly saying they support or oppose any individual political *candidate* by name. (This amendment was introduced by then-Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson, so this is often called the Johnson Amendment.) However, in the 66 years since this amendment was adopted, no church has ever lost its tax-exempt status on the basis of anything a pastor said in the pulpit .

Clarification: In 1992, the IRS did revoke the tax-exempt determination *letter* they had sent to the [Church at Pierce Creek](https://www.lc.org/Uploads/files/pdf/pastors_churches_politics_trifold_2008.pdf) in New York State, not because of anything the pastor had said in the pulpit, but because the church had taken out full-page ads opposing Bill Clinton in *USA Today* and *The Washington Times.* The IRS action was more symbolic than harmful to the church because church’s *tax-exempt* *status* was not affected, and no donations lost their tax-exempt status. This is because, unlike other nonprofit organizations, churches are automatically tax-exempt organizations whether or not they have an IRS determination letter affirming that status.

And the law in any case has never prohibited pastors or churches from taking positions on any moral or political *issues* that are part of an election campaign.

In addition, many legal experts believe the IRS would lose if this issue ever came into a court of law, because restricting what any pastor can say is a violation of freedom of speech and freedom of religion, both of which are part of the First Amendment to the Constitution. These experts believe the IRS regulation is unconstitutional, and I think they are correct.

Because of the particular status of tax law in the United States, such a law cannot be challenged in court until the IRS brings an action accusing someone of violating it. During the 2010s, a Christian legal advocacy group, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), coordinated the efforts of hundreds of pastors who intentionally wrote sermons violating the Johnson Amendment by endorsing a candidate by name (such as Mitt Romney for president). The ADF then collected these sermons and sent them to the IRS, hoping that the IRS would charge some of these pastors with violating the Johnson Amendment so that they could finally have the amendment declared unconstitutional in a court of law.

But the IRS did nothing about these sermons. Why? My personal opinion (and it is only that) is that the legal experts in the IRS decided there was too great a possibility that the courts would find that the Johnson Amendment, in telling pastors what they could and could not say, was unconstitutional because it was violating both freedom of religion and freedom of speech, which are First Amendment rights and have higher authority than any law passed by Congress.

The Johnson amendment has never been repealed by Congress, but on May 4, 2017, President Trump signed an executive order directing the Department of the Treasury (which includes the IRS) not to target the tax-exempt status of the churches who favor or oppose specific political candidates.

**Two kingdoms?** One objection is that there are two kingdoms in operation – the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man – and that the church should teach about and build the kingdom of God and not get involved in the kingdom of man. Didn’t Jesus say, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36)?

But surely these two kingdoms influence each other, for good or ill. And surely Christians are still called to do good for those who are not yet members of Jesus’ kingdom:

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10)

If we are to obey Jesus’ command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), that certainly includes seeking good government, not destructive and harmful government, for our neighbors as well as ourselves.

**6. Some people may leave your church, but the question is, have you been faithful to God?**

 Just last week a pastor told me that when he gave a message on political issues, one couple became angry and left the church. I replied that that does not mean he was wrong. It may just mean that he was faithfully teaching the Word of God and they rejected its teachings. (Later he told me that he had had a good conversation with them and they decided to return.)

 People walked out on Jesus when he began to preach unpopular truths (John 6:66), and the people in his hometown of Nazareth were so troubled by his teaching that they even tried to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). Paul was a remarkably successful evangelist to the Gentiles, but opponents who disliked his message eventually drove him out of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Thessalonica, and Berea (Acts 13:50; 14 5-6, 19; 17:5, 13-14). Yet at the end of his life he had the joy of knowing that he had been faithful to God: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

 If you believe that God is calling you to speak on some political/ moral issues, it is important to settle in your mind beforehand that a sense of God’s approval on your speaking will be more valuable to you than avoiding the (possible) loss of some friendships and supporters. That is a decision that only you can make. And who knows if God will bring more people to your church in response to your faithfulness?

**7. Pastors today have an unusual opportunity to influence the direction of history**

Will it make a difference whether you speak on politics or not? Yes, it will make a difference. I recently spoke at a local church about the issues at stake in this election, and what surprised me was the thoughtful, mature people who came up to me afterward and said, “Thank you for that clear explanation. I was so confused. I didn’t know what to think.” In my opinion, most pastors would be amazed at how many people in their churches aren’t sure how to vote this year, and aren’t even sure if they will vote at all.

What if you persuaded just 10 people to vote who otherwise would not have voted? Then if only 1,000 pastors like you influenced just 10 people to vote, that would be 10,000 additional votes. (Remember, George W. Bush won the presidency in 2000 by just 537 votes in the state of Florida.) And you might persuade more than 10 people. “In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good” (Ecclesiastes 11:6). The nation is at a decision point, and you have a unique opportunity to influence the outcome.

Will you succeed? Will your preferred candidate win? No one knows. The question is whether you have done your part. In years to come, will you be able to look back on 2020 and know that you were faithful to God’s guidance in doing what you were able to do?

**8. This election is about more than the next four years**

 The policies that Democrats and Republicans promise to enact have never in my lifetime been so different, perhaps never in American history (for the differences, see my “[Letter](https://townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem/2020/08/08/letter-to-an-antitrump-christian-friend-n2573909) to an Anti-Trump Christian Friend,” and also the platforms of [Democratic](https://democrats.org/where-we-stand/party-platform/) and [Republican](https://prod-cdn-static.gop.com/media/documents/DRAFT_12_FINAL%5B1%5D-ben_1468872234.pdfhttps%3A/prod-cdn-static.gop.com/media/documents/DRAFT_12_FINAL%5B1%5D-ben_1468872234.pdf) parties –– the Republicans kept their 2016 platform for 2020). America is truly at a turning point, and because of the immense power that judges now have, this election could set the direction of our nation not just for the next four years, but for the next 10 or 20 years or even more.

 Let me explain why. If Joe Biden wins the election and if Democrats gain a majority in the Senate, the Democratic platform promises to make Washington DC the 51st state (p. 58-59), which would automatically add two more Democratic senators to the U.S. Senate, making it more difficult for Republicans to ever regain a majority. And their platform holds open the possibility of making Puerto Rico the 52nd state (p. 59), giving a potential of yet two more Democratic senators.

 Present Trump has appointed and the Senate has so far confirmed 212 judges who now serve in the 852 district and circuit judgeships in the United States. But that positive influence on the judicial system could be quickly diluted because the Democratic platform says they are committed to “creating new federal district and circuit judgeships” (p. 38).

Trump has also appointed two of the nine Supreme Court justices (Gorsuch and Kavanaugh), and, with the death of Justice Ginsburg, he may yet be able to appoint a third justice giving the court a 6-3 majority of conservative or “originalist” justices who will rule according to the original meaning of the Constitution and laws (but Chief Justice John Roberts is an unreliable originalist vote). Whoever wins this presidential election will likely be able to choose one or perhaps two justices (Breyer is 82, Thomas is 72, and Alito is 70).

Even if no one retires, several Democrats have raised the possibility of adding six new seats to the Supreme Court, which could give a 9-6 majority of young, “living Constitution” judges who do not consider themselves subject to the original meanings of the Constitution and laws, but think that they have the authority to rewrite these documents according to what they now think the Constitution or law should have said.

The result would be one politically far left policy after another imposed on the country, not by laws passed through Congress and signed by the president, but by judicial rulings that would find a way to claim that these rulings are “constitutional” and therefore impossible to change by any future president or Congress.

 But if President Trump is reelected, the next four years will look very different from the Democratic vision. Trump will likely appoint one or two more Supreme Court justices and hundreds of additional district and circuit court judges who believe that “no one is above the law,” and therefore they will not consider themselves to be above the Constitution and the laws and able to give them new meanings, but rather will consider themselves to be subject to the law, understood according to the meaning of the words at the time the law or the Constitution itself were written. Therefore new laws will only be created, not by the novel ideas of powerful judges, but as they should be created, through the actions of state legislatures and governors and the actions of the US Congress and the president, all of whom are accountable to the people through the election process.

**9. Genuine threats to religious freedom**

In my view, the most troubling possibility is the threat of a significant loss of religious freedom that would likely follow a Biden-Harris victory. The Democratic platform promises, “We will reject the Trump Administration’s use of broad religious exemptions to allow businesses, medical providers, social service agencies, and others to discriminate” (p. 48).

This sentence, if understood in the context of recent Democratic policy advocacy and judicial activism, predicts a whole series of lawsuits attempting to force Christians in businesses to violate their consciences by requiring that their insurance plans pay for abortifacient medicines, abortions, and sex-change surgeries. It predicts that doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals would be required to participate in abortions or lose their jobs. It predicts that professional counselors would be prohibited from attempting to help homosexual men and women who want to begin to live a heterosexual lifestyle. It predicts that Christian bakeries, photographers, and florists would face heavy fines for “discrimination” and be driven into bankruptcy if they refused to bake a cake, take wedding photographs, or provide flower arrangements for same-sex weddings. The 2020 Democratic platform says Democrats will “reject” the Trump administration’s “broad religious exemptions” that today are still protecting Christians from such government oppression.

In addition, this platform statement predicts that Christian adoption agencies and foster care agencies would be put out of business because of “discrimination” unless they were willing to place children with homosexual, lesbian, and transgender couples. It predicts that Christian schools and colleges would be forced to close because of “discrimination” unless they allowed transgender students to use restrooms, locker rooms, showers, and on-campus housing that corresponds to their chosen “gender identity” rather than their biological sex. And, if Canada and some European countries provide a precedent, this statement predicts that even pastors and other Christian leaders might be prosecuted for hate speech if they dare to speak publicly against any aspect of the LGBT+ agenda.

**10. What political issues could a pastor preach about today?**

 Here are some suggestions of topics on which Democrats and Republicans clearly differ, and on which I think the Bible does give helpful guidance:

(1) **Religious freedom:** the “free exercise” of religion includes life outside the walls of the church, which we should be able to live according to our consciences (Hebrews 13:18; 1 Peter 3:16; Acts 5:29; Daniel 3:13-20; 1 Corinthians 10:31)

(2) **Obeying the law:** The Bible requires that we obey the law (Romans 13:1-5; 1 Peter 2:13-14), except when it commands us to sin against God (Acts 5:29). Therefore:

- judges do not have a right to change the meaning of laws or of our highest human law, the American Constitution (the Constitution provides another means of changing laws)

- peaceful protests are lawful, but rioting, looting, arson, and assaulting police officers are not lawful or morally right

(2) **Abortion**: unborn children should be protected by law (Exodus 21:22-25; Psalm 51:5; Deuteronomy 30:19-20; Psalm 139:13)

(3) **Sexual orientation and gender identity:** governments should not require us to treat biological males like females and biological females like males. (Genesis 1:27; Leviticus 12:2-5; 18:22; Numbers 27:8-9; Deuteronomy 22:5; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; Titus 2:2-6)

(5) **Marijuana**: medical marijuana should be allowed by law, and regulated like other medicines, but recreational marijuana is highly destructive to a society and should be prohibited (Ephesians 5:18; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:19-21; Revelation 9:21; 21:8)

**(6) Immigration and border security:** how does God want us to wisely apply the command to “love the sojourner” (Deuteronomy 10:19) as well as the commands to be subject to the government and obey its laws (Romans 13:1-5). If we dislike current immigration laws, what is the best way to get those laws changed? Is it right for a nation to have a wall to protect its borders? ? (Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:19; Psalm 122:7; Psalm 51:18; 2 Chronicles 36:19; Nehemiah 1:3; 2:17; Proverbs 25:28)

(7) **Global warming/climate change:** Did God create an earth with such beneficial energy sources as coal, oil, and natural gas, but also booby-trap them so that by using them we would destroy the earth? Or did he create an earth with self-correcting mechanisms and long-term cycles of gradual warming and cooling? (Genesis 1:28, 31; 1 Timothy 4:4-5; 6:17; Genesis 9:11; Psalm 104:9; Jeremiah 5:22; Isaiah 45:18)

[Note: I list the alleged threat of catastrophic global warming as an issue here because it is one of the primary rationales behind the push by Democrats for ever-increasing government control of our lives. For more information see the [Cornwall Alliance](https://cornwallalliance.org/) or chapter 41of my *Christian Ethics*.]

**(8) Military power:** How strong should our military power be? Should we be committed to using it if necessary to defend a smaller ally (Taiwan, South Korea, Israel) against a powerful aggressor or to keep the world’s sea lanes free from modern-day pirates and attacks by rogue nations? (Deuteronomy 7:1-3; 10:1; Joshua 1:6-9; Romans 13:3-4)

**(9) Other topics (where both parties agree):** I have not included in this list some topics on which Republican and Democratic leaders agree, such as:

-- racism is evil

-- we must continually defend against terrorist attacks, and

-- we must continue to pursue effective therapies and vaccines against the COVID-19 virus.

**(10) Still other topics (where evangelical Christians might not agree):** I have also not included in this list several other topics on which Republicans and Democrats generally differ, and about which there may be more differences among evangelical Christians. I myself have clear convictions on these issues (see my books *Christian Ethics, Politics According to the Bible,* and *The Poverty of Nations*), but I recognize that pastors might decide not to discuss these, or might want to address them in some other forum than the Sunday morning sermon:

- tax rates

- economic growth

- the best way to help the poor and find effective solutions to poverty

- government regulation of businesses – more or less?

- school choice

- Israel

- firearms and self-defense

- foreign policy

 **(11) What about a write-in vote for president?**

The ability to vote is a stewardship given to us by God, and essential to that stewardship is *a responsibility to affect the outcome of an election*. By placing us in a country that has a democratic form of government and not a dictatorship or monarchy, we each have a small role as part of the “governing authority” that God has placed over our nation. “We the people” are in fact the human rulers of our nation. By voting, we play a role in governing. By voting, we are acting as “God’s servant” for the “good” of the people as a whole (see Romans 13:4).

But voting for a write-in candidate or third-party candidate will not fulfill that stewardship because it will have no effect whatsoever on the outcome of this election. It has the same impact on the outcome as staying home and not voting. Therefore I consider it to be a misuse of our stewardship. It seems to me like putting an empty envelope in the offering plate when it passes you in church – it is going through the motions but accomplishing nothing. Another illustration that comes to mind is hiding your talent in the ground (Matthew 25:25).

The only choice available to us is a choice between two complete packages:

Package 1. Donald Trump and his policies

Package 2. Joe Biden and his policies

Both choices come as whole packages, and they are the only choices we have at the present time. Consider this teaching from Proverbs: “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it” (Proverbs 3:27).

**Conclusion**:

 If you believe that God is calling you to teach about some political issues, you also have an opportunity to model how Christians can respect each other even when we have political differences. You can model a respectful and thoughtful tone. You might even consider giving opportunity for a responsible spokesman to express views different from yours. And it’s up to you whether you mention the Democratic and Republican parties by name, or whether you speak in general about “Party A” and “Party B,” or whether you just speak purely about issues without mentioning any political party.

 How many issues should you speak about? I cannot decide that for you. But I don’t think the answer is zero.

Wayne Grudem is distinguished research professor of theology and Biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary in Arizona and the author of *Christian Ethics* and *Politics According to the Bible*. The opinions expressed here are his own and do not represent the viewpoint of Phoenix Seminary.