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# Chapter 1



## Let's Talk! Bringing the Taboo to the Table

*If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend.*

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

One need not be well-versed in the intricate details of proper etiquette to know some basic truths about the unspoken rules of “polite” conversation. There are two topics that a polite guest never mentions at a dinner party: politics and religion.

Why might etiquette books warn people to steer clear of these subjects? People often have deeply held beliefs about religion and politics, so discussions of such intensely personal topics can quickly become divisive and uncomfortable. Instead of initiating a conversation that could lead to frustration and anger, it may seem wiser to avoid such subjects altogether. But silence or shouting matches are not the only options. If we can find ways to think and talk about religion and politics that won't automatically cause friction, perhaps we can be less afraid to bring these topics to the table.

Although Miss Manners may warn against discussing either of these subjects, the purpose of this book is to defy those rules of etiquette and encourage you to talk about them. This book will

help you find appropriate ways to break from the social convention and talk more, not less, about religion and politics.

As a professor of American politics teaching at a Christian college, I think about the connections between religious and political perspectives every day. Although this task is not always comfortable or easy, it is not only valuable—it is essential. Religious values and beliefs directly and indirectly affect how most Americans think about politics. To contribute productively to contemporary debates about American politics, we need to understand both the role of religion and the purpose and limitations of government.

This book is designed to help you navigate the rocky waters of religion and politics so you can engage in lively and fruitful conversations. The chapters that follow will help you address questions such as: How should my Christian perspective affect my political views? How should I respond when I see Christian leaders disagree about politics? Should Christians just avoid politics altogether? How should my faith affect my voting decisions and political participation? On this journey, you will learn more about the American political system and how your faith can inform your political views and actions.

### Religion and Politics, “American Style”

Anytime we begin to talk about a serious topic, it is useful to know where everyone is coming from. We cannot help but bring our own perspectives, life stories, and viewpoints into a discussion. We all have ideas about how the world works and what we think is most important, and these ideas help shape our understanding of those around us. If three people are discussing effective parenting techniques, it is useful to know that one has three teenagers, another has a toddler and a baby, and the third has no children. Each person can contribute important insights to the conversation, but their views will likely, in part, reflect their personal experiences.

Let me begin our conversation together by mentioning three

of my starting points. I will introduce some of my underlying assumptions about the role of religion in the United States to help you better understand the perspective that will guide the rest of my discussion.

*The United States Is, and Has Always Been, a Nation of Many Faiths*

Any frank discussion of religion in contemporary American politics must begin with the recognition that the United States is not, nor ever has been, exclusively Christian. The Constitution created a democratic government designed to protect individual freedoms. Freedom of religion, one of those cherished liberties, is a foundational principle of American democracy.



Given the religious diversity of the United States, we should not expect everyone to accept nor to embrace political arguments that appeal exclusively to Christian principles and doctrine.



People from a wide diversity of faiths live in the United States and participate in American politics. According to recent survey data, about three of four adult Americans identify themselves within the Christian tradition, but dozens of other religions also have a place here. Consider one example: The number of Americans identifying as Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus has more than doubled in the past decade alone. These three religions combined now represent about the same percentage of the population as Jews. The religious group growing most rapidly is seculars,

those who say they are not religious at all.

This book approaches the subject of religion and politics in the United States with an awareness of and appreciation for our nation's religious diversity. Just as I want the government to protect my freedom to worship as I choose, so must I promote policies that respect the rights of others to practice their religion. Furthermore, given the religious diversity of the United States, we should not expect everyone to accept nor to embrace political arguments that appeal exclusively to Christian principles and doctrine. Religious views and traditions can and should inform our political perspectives; indeed, the purpose of this book is to help you apply your faith to your politics with care and discernment. But even as we approach politics and government as Christians, we should do so aware that we are engaging in conversations with people from a wide range of perspectives.

### *Religion Affects Everyone's View of Politics*

A second underlying assumption builds from the first. Although some people may think that their religious views have little influence on their thoughts on politics, in practice this is rarely, if ever, the case. Views of religion, notions of right and wrong, and beliefs about the existence of a god or gods and life after death all affect politics, either directly or indirectly.

Consider a few examples of religion directly influencing politics. Some pastors, priests, rabbis, and other religious leaders teach their faithful to support particular political issues and candidates. Many people talk informally about politics when they gather for worship or other congregational events. At some houses of worship, interest groups distribute voter guides that "compare" candidates for office on a few select issues, sending a clear directive about which candidate deserves the vote.

Because religious beliefs provide a basis for morality, religion also has an indirect but significant influence over political views.

In much the same way that religious teaching helps us discern right from wrong in everyday life, it also offers a framework for evaluating a legislative proposal, comparing candidates for office, or assessing the latest actions of the local school board. Even those who do not identify with a particular religion still uphold some form of moral code that, much like an explicitly religious worldview, will affect their approach to politics.

*The Ultimate Christian Calling Is to Love God and Follow Him*

If religion really affects everyone's views of politics but we don't all share the same religious views, how do we reach enough agreement to govern effectively? Although the context of American politics makes it difficult to reach democratic consensus, I believe that Christians can serve important roles in shaping and guiding both politics and the wider culture. These beliefs lead to my third starting point: politics and government are important, but the most important Christian calling is to love God and follow Him.

As participants in a representative democracy, we need to learn about politics and government to help us make positive civic contributions, but influence in government and politics should never be our primary goal. Political power is enticing and potentially very dangerous; the lure of power can quickly turn us away from serving God. In politics as in all endeavors, Christians must not lose sight of their ultimate purpose.

In his classic writing *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine writes to a young church trying to interpret Scripture correctly and avoid heresy. He points to love as the guiding principle of Christianity, reminding his readers of Jesus' explanation when asked what was the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37–40). Keeping in mind

what Augustine calls the “double love” of God and neighbor will help us discern God’s truth from false teaching and provide a guide for Christian thought and action.

### Honoring God in Politics and Government

Where should we look for guidelines for engaging with politics in ways that demonstrate love for God and our neighbors? What biblical principles can guide us as we seek to honor God in politics and government?

#### *A Blueprint for Politics in the Old Testament*

The Ten Commandments provide a helpful starting point. The first commandment calls us to worship God alone, and the second follows from it, prohibiting idolatry:

*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:3–6)*

Only the one true God is worthy of worship, yet other gods capture our attention and fight to take His place. Political power is one such potential idol. If Christians lose confidence in God’s sovereign control and instead look primarily to politics to restore society and culture, they can make government into such an idol.

Likewise, the third commandment reminds us of the power and holiness of God and His perfect name: “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (Exodus 20:7). Far more than

condemning swearing, this commandment warns against using God's name for anything that does not honor Him.

When defending our political views and actions, we should follow the principles of the third commandment, using God's name with utmost care and reverence. As one pastor explained, "God's answer to a world that blasphemes His name is a community who honors His name. Honoring the Lord's name is our highest calling. Christ will be honored when the world sees a community of people who show awe and affection for Him."<sup>1</sup> In politics as in all spheres of life, we should honor God and serve as light to the world.

### *A Blueprint for Politics in the New Testament*

In much the same way that the first three commandments offer principles to guide Christians who are thinking about politics and government, New Testament passages also provide important insights. Many commentators rightly direct believers to Paul's discussion of civil authority in Romans 13. Although this passage provides a useful description of God's provision for government, when I am asked what biblical text I find most practical for developing a Christian approach to politics, I point first to a different passage, 1 Corinthians 12 and 13.

In this letter, Paul encourages and instructs the church in Corinth, a church struggling with internal division and with a culture fixated on status and power. As one commentator observes, "Paul's purpose is not to correct their theology but to get them to think theologically so they would respond properly to their polytheistic, pluralistic culture."<sup>2</sup> We, too, can find guidance in this epistle to help us think theologically about interactions with politics and government.

First Corinthians chapters 11 through 14 offer Paul's teaching on worship, life in community, and spiritual gifts. He is concerned that some in the church are too prideful, and he writes to correct them. In a short detour from the specific topic of spiritual gifts,

Paul reminds the Corinthians that love is the central guiding principle for interaction with God and with one another. Toward the end of this famous description of God's unconditional love, Paul writes:

*Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:8–13)*

Even as we are reminded of the power and depth of God's love, we are also cautioned of our human limitations. Paul warns against spiritual pride, reminding us that we all "see but a poor reflection as in a mirror" (v. 12). Our own sinfulness and the fallen state of nature cloud our vision. We can look with hope for the day we will "see face to face" and "know fully," for everything will indeed be clear in God's eternal presence. But, in the meantime, life this side of heaven will be marked by confusion and uncertainty.

### A Framework for Thinking about Politics

So how might politics look different if viewed through the prism of the first three commandments and 1 Corinthians 12 and 13? Let me suggest four principles to guide a Christian framework for thinking about politics and government.

- *We all “see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” and therefore should exercise genuine humility when discussing politics.*

When politicians speak, they typically speak with great certainty and clarity. We expect our elected officials to act decisively, and their rhetoric reflects these expectations. But certainty can quickly turn to arrogance, especially when combined with religious language. Critics will often say of someone who holds an opposing view: “Who does she think she is? God?”

Biblical examples such as Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians suggest a very different model for talking about politics. If indeed we only have partial knowledge, it follows that a Christian perspective on politics should begin in a context of humility and love. As limited humans, we don’t have all the answers. Instead of arrogantly proclaiming our political views, we should approach this subject, as all others, with awareness of our limitations and reliance on God’s love and wisdom. We can speak from our religious convictions with love and humility, arguing our views with passion but with respect for others.



Since we all have imperfect knowledge this side of heaven and we are each created to serve different functions in the body of believers, it follows that Christians may disagree on political issues.



## THE POWER OF ADMITTING MISTAKES



**MANY POLITICIANS SPEAK** with certainty because they follow an unwritten rule of politics: never admit you're wrong. When problems arise, deflect the blame. West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin broke this rule. Only a month after assuming office, critics dubbed the new senator "No Show Joe" for his absence during Senate votes on two controversial bills. Manchin apologized in a conference call with the media, explaining he had been back home for a long-planned family Christmas celebration. "Let me apologize to anybody and everybody within our listening and reading areas. I'm very sorry for missing the two votes," he said. "[Constituents] were upset; they were upset over what they had heard or the way it was reported. But I take total blame. It was a mistake."<sup>3</sup>

- *The diversity of the body of Christ makes room for Christians to disagree on many political matters.*

God creates each man and woman as a unique bearer of His image, giving each person a distinctive set of talents that glorify God. As Paul reminded the church in Corinth: "But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body" (1 Corinthians 12:18–20). We are created to live and serve in community, so

it makes sense that Christians work best when they combine their perspectives and gifts to work together for the common good. Each person has a valuable contribution to offer.

Since we all have imperfect knowledge this side of heaven and we are each created to serve different functions in the body of believers, it follows that Christians may disagree on political issues. One person might have a special concern and care about education, while another is a strong advocate for the environment, and yet another has a passion for tax policy. We can celebrate these passionate perspectives as gifts from God. Let's take the argument even further. Perhaps God even impresses on the hearts of two Christian believers political views that seem, from our limited perspective, direct opposites. Through constructive dialogue and honest listening, Christians with opposing political views can sharpen one another and help inform each other's political perspectives. Think of how discussions of politics within our churches would change if we began conversations with the recognition that our own particular view on a political issue is imperfect and that another person who holds a different view might also have insight from God.

- *The label "Christian" belongs to God and His work, not to validate human efforts like politics.*

Responding to the question of whether Christians in Great Britain should start a Christian political party, C. S. Lewis answered an emphatic no. Invoking the third commandment, Lewis argued that labeling a particular political group "Christian" would misuse God's name:

The principle which divides [a "Christian" party] from its brethren and unites it to its political allies will not be theological. It will have no authority to speak for Christianity. . . . It will not simply be a part of Christendom, but a part claiming to be

the whole. By the mere act of calling itself the Christian Party it implicitly accuses all Christians who do not join it of apostasy and betrayal. It will be exposed, in an aggravated degree, to that temptation to which the Devil spares none of us at any time—the temptation of claiming for our favourite opinions that kind and degree of certainty and authority which really belongs only to our Faith.<sup>4</sup>

When we attach the Christian label to things that are not from God, we claim for ourselves an authority that rightfully belongs to God alone.

The Christian label is also dangerous in that it uses God's perfect name as a descriptor for something imperfect. In my work on Capitol Hill, I occasionally encountered activists from "Christian" groups behaving in ways that maligned the name of Christ. In one particularly embarrassing episode, representatives of a Christian interest group came to thank a congresswoman for her sponsorship of legislation important to their agenda. At the start of the meeting, the congresswoman inadvertently offended the organization's leader by asking her to introduce herself. The simple question so wounded the leader's pride that she instructed her assistant to call our office and cut off all further cooperation and communication with the congresswoman and her staff. This encounter with public Christians was a harmful witness; indeed, the incident turned the label Christian into an object of ridicule among some staff members.

- *Politics can and should be a means for demonstrating love in action and building the body of Christ.*

Unfortunately, far too many discussions of Christianity and politics end as shouting matches instead of positive and constructive dialogues. An environment that encourages simplifying

issues into two positions, “us” versus “them,” creates instant enemies, as if anyone expressing an opinion on a political question must be preparing for war. When Christians speak hatefully of another believer, they sin against their Christian brother or sister and harm the unity of the church. When Christians speak with hatred toward someone outside the church or intentionally cause dissension, they damage the reputation of the church and its witness.

Instead of demonizing those who disagree with us, we should approach them in Christian love. In this age of negative campaigning and personal attack politics, it is almost impossible to imagine a political world modeled after the love described in 1 Corinthians 13. How would the tone of politics change if political opponents actually interacted with each other with patience, kindness, trust, and hope? How different would campaign advertisements look if they “did not delight in evil but rejoiced with the truth”? Although Christians are not likely to change the nature of politics overnight, it is indeed possible and praiseworthy to justify political positions in a manner that is not boastful, self-seeking, or rude. If Christians viewed politics as a means for demonstrating love in action as a witness to the world, the way we approach politics could fundamentally change. More importantly, we could live the gospel by demonstrating the transformative power of love in action. Politicians might not be as successful on the campaign trail, but then again, winning office is not the ultimate goal of the Christian life.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

Now that I have shared some of my assumptions and suggested some principles to help Christians think about politics, let's briefly look at the journey ahead. The next two chapters bring a few more basics to the table. After explaining how and when compromise might be a good thing, I defend government as an essential part of a strong and vibrant society.

The second part of the book offers a brief overview of the

American political system and how it works. Chapter 4 looks at the different layers and branches of government with which we interact in our daily lives, and chapter 5 explains the role of political parties and ideology. The section ends with a discussion of the role of church and state in theory and in practice.

The third and final section of the book provides tools and resources that will help you connect your faith with politics. Chapter 7 presents different models for relating faith and politics. After offering suggestions for how to handle political disagreements in chapter 8, I then tackle a complicated policy issue: reducing poverty. The section ends with a practical guide for deciding how to vote and a concluding chapter that suggests ways politics can help us accomplish our ultimate goal: demonstrating love for God and neighbor.

Political scientist Harold Lasswell perhaps unintentionally created a new definition of politics with the title of his book: *Politics: Who Gets What, When, and How*. At its heart, politics is all about people and meeting their needs, so politics and government offer Christians a way to live out the commandment to love our neighbors. In the pages that follow, you will learn more about politics and ways that you can honor God with your participation in it. By the time you reach the end of this book, my hope is that you will be better equipped to serve God and serve others. So let's begin.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### Reflecting

1. Think of times in the past when you have talked about politics with friends, family, or coworkers. What was one of the most satisfying conversations? What made it so positive? What was one of the most uncomfortable discussions? Why was it difficult?

2. What are some of your central assumptions about the role of religion in the United States? Where did you develop these views? Have any of your assumptions changed over time?

### **Responding**

3. What are some practical ways that politics can help us live out our call to love God and neighbor?