




Missional Journal

BIBLICAL SEMINARY

David G. Dunbar, President

December 2010, Vol. 4 No. 6

Forward this email
to a friend 

Click below to access past
Missional Journals

[Archived Missional Journals](#)

Blog with Dave
[Share Your Thoughts](#)

Quick Links

[Biblical's Website](#)

[C4ML at Biblical](#)

If you are interested in supporting
our vision for seminary education
click below

[Institutional Advancement](#)

[Planned Giving](#)

Does Jesus Love Democrats *and* Republicans?

Let's face it; Jesus was not really in touch with political reality. How else shall we understand his obvious gaffe in recruiting Zealots *and* tax collectors for his fledgling Messianic community? Would any right-thinking leader believe that such extremes of political practice, cultural outlook, and personality type could be melded into a powerful expression of the in-breaking kingdom?

I suspect that Jesus would not be well received in many churches in our land. We have a much more realistic understanding of Christian community. We know that it is easier to get along with people who look at the world pretty much the same way we do. After all, politics is an explosive topic that surfaces passionately held convictions, cultural prejudices, and profound anxieties about the current condition and future outlook of our culture. And that means we find it particularly helpful to associate with folks who share our political outlook. Many churches have a definite political flavor; they thereby send the message that to be a member in good standing requires allegiance to a specific political party or ideology.

A recent book by evangelical scholar James Davison Hunter is very helpful in framing our situation sociologically. He argues that one of the more important cultural developments in America over the last century is "a tendency toward the politicization of nearly everything."^[1] This is a reflection of the increasing pluralism of American life: "The politicization of everything is an indirect measure of the loss of a common culture and, in turn, the competition among factions to dominate others on their own terms."^[2]

The politics of polarization

The ubiquity of politics has a particularly serious impact on human relationships. Hunter borrows from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche the French word *ressentiment* which suggests not only "resentment" but also "a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action." Such attitudes are now a fundamental part of politics, and it leads to "a discourse of negation; the condemnation and denigration of enemies in the effort to subjugate and dominate those who are culpable."^[3] Political advertising during the recent election season confirms Hunter's observation.

The challenge for the church is that we are called to bear witness to the gospel in this cultural climate. In every culture and in every generation the church has faced the danger of syncretism--the absorption and transformation of the good news into something more agreeable to the world's assumptions and preferences. I believe the American church has succumbed to a form of syncretism. We have allowed the church to become politicized. This is Hunter's central concern: "It is not an exaggeration to say that *the dominant witness of the Christian churches in America since the early 1980s has been a political witness.*"^[4]

But politics is a culture of *ressentiment*, and it is extremely difficult for Christians to swim against the tide of negativism. Listen to the way we talk about politics. It is a language of anger, suspicion, exclusion, and violence. Current vernacular tells us we are in a "culture war" of "bitter conflict" in which Christians should pray, organize, speak out, etc. in order to "take back the country" and "reclaim our Christian heritage."

Some who use this language defend it on the grounds that it accurately reflects the extraordinary challenges faced by Christians in America and that the Bible itself frequently uses the metaphors of battle and warfare to describe the Christian life. Paul exhorts believers to "put on the full armor of God" (Eph. 6:11); he encourages Timothy to "fight the good fight" (1 Tim. 1:18); and he testifies at the end of his life that he has done the same (2 Tim. 4:7). Even our Lord said that he did not come to bring peace but a sword (Matt. 10:34).

The dangers of war talk

So if Christian faith has a warfare motif in its history anyway, what's the problem? Why not use this rhetoric to mobilize believers for action? The answer is that, in the current political climate, warfare language is particularly susceptible to misunderstanding. John Woodbridge of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School addressed this some years ago when he warned of the "dangers of war talk." He pointed out that "culture-war rhetoric leads us to distort others' positions, to see enmity in place of mere disagreement." But equally problematic is the fact that war talk "distorts our own position too--making our message seem mainly to be angry criticism when it ought to be the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ."^[5]

Habitual use of such language may also result in a distorted **self-understanding**--we may allow conflict metaphors to dominate our identity and forget that we are people of peace called to be peace-makers. We may forget that the battle is not ours but the Lord's. Or to say it slightly differently, we are in a battle, but the *real battle* is not political (although it impacts every sphere of life including politics).

The point is that we must think about our circumstances **missionally**. The rapid decline of Western culture is sad and disturbing to many of us, but the West is not the kingdom of God (as majority-world Christians are quick to remind us). A missiologist friend of mine says that American Christians are too pessimistic because they don't have a broader vision of the extraordinary expansion of the gospel that has happened around the world in the last century.^[6]

The danger associated with politicized churches is that we lose our vision for the reconciling power of the gospel. We forget that the kingdom of God is the peaceable kingdom that forms one people of God from myriad languages, cultures, nations and tribes. And this includes the Democratic and Republican tribes.

A political fast

It appears that Jesus loves Democrats **and** Republicans. If that is so, American churches need to reevaluate how their political posture has shaped their proclamation and embodiment of the gospel. In a culture that politicizes nearly everything, politics itself becomes an idol. We assume that politicians can do much more than is really the case. We exchange kingdom hopes for political promises, and we are bound to be disappointed--all idols disappoint their worshipers in the end.

We need to take politics and politicians less seriously. Perhaps our churches should consider a fast from politics. Fasting is temporary abstinence from food to remind us that food itself can become an idol. We don't live by earthly bread alone but by the bread that comes from heaven. Worshiping and serving the living God is more critical than caring for our needs and our agendas.

Maybe we need to step out of the arena of politics, at least until we can get our eyes back on the kingdom of God.[7] Until we realize that politics is *not* everything. Until we stop taking politics so seriously. Until our churches can extend the love of Jesus equally to Democrats and Republicans.

How about an experiment in which we give up political discussion for three months? We could abstain from reading political editorials, avoid political jokes around the water cooler, refuse to comment on the latest political gossip (there is lots of that!), and simply pray for (not against!) political leaders. What might this do for us? Might it decrease our anxiety levels? Could it increase our spiritual energy? Would it help us to relate more positively to others? Would it invite a deeper experience of the power of the gospel among us?

In my next article I want to think further about the church's role in a society dominated by politics and culture wars.



[1] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford, 2010), p. 102.

[2] Hunter, p. 107.

[3] Hunter, pp. 107-8.

[4] Hunter, p. 12.

[5] John D. Woodbridge, "Culture War Casualties," *Christianity Today* (Vol. 39, No. 3, March 6, 1995), p. 22.

[6] An encouraging book in this regard is Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (IVP, 2010).

[7] Hunter suggests that "...it may be that the healthiest course of action for Christians...is to be silent for a season and learn how to enact their faith in public through acts of shalom rather than to try again to represent it publicly through law, policy, and political mobilization." Hunter, p. 281.