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Peaceful Preaching in a Polarised World

Why I've changed my mind about bringing politics to the pulpit, and six ways I try to do it well.

The first—and sadly only—time I met my wife's uncle was on my wedding day 30 years ago. At 6 foot 11, he towered over all the other guests. He was so much taller than the rest of us that I wondered how the photographer was going to frame the photos.

I needn't have worried. The uncle in question, perhaps anticipating the same issue, took the opportunity to slip into town to buy a wedding present. He returned in time for my speech, which I saw as the perfect opportunity to share the gospel in no uncertain terms for the benefit of him and all our other unbelieving friends and family members. His comment afterwards made my heart sink. He seemed to have missed the whole point. "You should be in politics," he told me.

Back then I had absolutely no intention of ever going into politics. I was an evangelist through and through. I loved to preach and to teach the Bible. I wanted to take the gospel to the ends of the earth and build churches that would turn the world upside down.

Politics didn't fit into my plan, at all. In fact, I didn't want anything to do with the shady corridors of power with its sordid scandals, empty promises, Bible-twisting propaganda, and spaghetti of bureaucracy. Faith and politics seemed to me to be the exact antithesis of each other. Politics has no place in the pulpit, or so I thought.

Years later, I discovered that not only was I wrong but my wife's uncle was right. I realised that even though most of our worship songs, devotional books, and sermons only focus on a person's individual relationship with God, the Bible paints quite a different picture.

The Bible reveals that God cares about our relationships with each other and with the planet on which we live. He mandates us to serve the poor, seek the welfare of the city, and speak up for those who have no voice. He shows us how we can be Daniels, Josephs, and Esthers in the world. He models how kings, prophets, and ordinary people can be peacemakers in our nations, ushering in God's blessing and his kingdom.

Thirty years after my wedding speech, I am still deeply committed to preaching the Bible and calling people to investigate and pledge allegiance to Jesus. But these days I use a different canvas.

I go to the corridors of power with my faith, and I speak there to anyone who will listen—using words and actions to advocate for those who have no voice—for refugees, children in the care system, and those who are marginalised, disempowered, or under-resourced.

Then I go to churches of all shapes and sizes and preach there to anyone who will listen—I show how the Bible speaks not only into our world’s problems but also how it speaks today to our world’s leaders, to those who vote for and against them, and to all those who are impacted by the decisions they make.

Today, I believe that the words of my wife’s uncle should apply to every preacher: “You should be in politics.” Not because we should abandon our pulpits, but because our pulpits are the place of influence that God has called us to. Not because we follow one party or another, but because we follow God. Not because we don’t care about those in our churches, but precisely because we do. Not because politics is good in itself but because politics by itself is flawed.

At its core, politics is concerned with power, people, places, problems, as well as the pursuit of peace. In all these areas, the church has a mandate and a message. We see it in the Great Commission and throughout the Bible.

This year, with half of the world going to the polls, the church has a critical moment of opportunity and preachers have a unique platform. We can help people rise to the challenge of choosing governments that are not just tailored to Christians, but suitable for everyone. Our pulpits point voters and politicians towards good global geo-politics, international peace and security, and compassion for the millions who are displaced or who are living in poverty.

On the other hand, the words that ripple out from our pulpits can have catastrophic consequences. The views expressed by Christians and the leaders of our nations directly impact global conflicts—for better or worse. The sermons we preach can lead to greater divisions in our churches, amplify misinformation in our communities, and escalate troubles around the world.

Preaching is a tough calling. Not only is it a spiritual gift with eternity-changing dynamics, but it also impacts the here and now, as well as what’s next. Our interpretation and our application of Scripture directly influences the hearts, minds, and votes of people both inside and outside of our churches, and collectively it has the potential to shift the results of an election, impacting the future of millions.

Our silence on the challenging topics of the day can have just as powerful an effect. It can leave our congregations uninformed about the biblical teaching on the big issues, and it models political disengagement and the abdication of our calling to be salt and light in the world.

So how do we simultaneously preach *about* politics and preach *into* politics? Advocating for one party over another is out of the question. Shoehorning God into our political preferences or smuggling politics into our reading of Scripture is similarly out of the question. Neither can we afford to stoke division, seek to enhance our personal reputation, or cash in on the angst of the day. All these options threaten to compromise our integrity and our adherence to *sola Scriptura*.

Here are six principles I try to follow in the interface between church and government that may help you too.

1. Be Led by Scripture, Not Culture

I can’t get away from the fact that the Bible is full of politics. There are vast numbers of pages dedicated to laws and leaders; governments are displayed at their best and at their worst; leaders are advised on how to act godly and justly; and citizens are given principles on how to interact with those in authority.

Perhaps surprisingly, Scripture says more about welcoming strangers and immigrants than it does about taking holy Communion. It says more about caring for creation, conducting business, and blessing the nations, than about how

to spend time in personal devotions. It says more about a leader's commitment to doing what is right in God's eyes, than about their age, personality, or skin colour. It says more about how we should care for others, than how we should care for ourselves.

There are whole books like Amos and Kings dedicated to international relations and its impact on communities and individuals. Daniel and Revelation describe the forces at work behind governments. Letters like 1 Peter and Galatians give us practical advice on what to do when everything seems to be going wrong.

The life of Jesus is told against the backdrop of great political turmoil. At times he was severely critical about the leaders. At times his silence spoke louder than words. Sometimes he expressed his sadness. Sometimes he expressed his anger. Sometimes he challenged. Sometimes he comforted. Always he expressed his love. After all this, he was deemed to be such a political threat that he was killed.

If "the whole counsel of God" devotes significant time to political principles and examples, it would be wrong of us to entirely banish politics from our churches and pulpits.

Whenever possible, I try to model the priorities of Scripture by regular, consistent, sequential, expository Bible preaching. This can help me avoid the temptation to succumb to my soapbox subjects, to cherry-pick passages that closely align with my personal interests, or to skip difficult or controversial chapters.

2. Be Pastoral, Not Partisan

The church's role is not to instruct or influence who our congregants vote for. In many countries that is illegal, and in almost every instance pastorally inappropriate. If we believe in freedom of conscience, the fallibility of leaders, and individual responsibility, we cannot allow our own political allegiances or frustrations to jeopardise our essential callings to evangelise and make disciples, even while helping others to navigate the complexities of their own political engagement.

A gospel-informed, non-partisan take on politics in a polarised world is a pastoral provision to God's people. It gifts our congregants a model of talking through principles and implications without being pushy or defensive. In my experience, it is a model that others can replicate at work, in school, or among their family and friends.

I try to model a pastoral approach to political and religious conversations that knows which questions to ask, how far to challenge people's ideas, and when to change the subject. One that is honest about the challenges, risks, and shortcomings of both sides of the debate. This model seeks to build people up and to build bridges between them. It looks out for the practical and spiritual needs of the vulnerable and marginalised. It weeps with those who weep and rejoices with those who rejoice. It minimises trauma, builds resilience, and fosters hope and peace.

3. Be Curious, Not Furious

When we get a flurry of emails from concerned members of our church because of our stance on an issue, or someone threatens to remove their much-needed financial support if we don't align with their position on a hot topic, our natural reaction is to feel angry and upset. When men and women in our congregations suddenly refuse to share the Communion table because they are theological and political opponents, it can make us want to shake sense into them.

The difficult calling of a church leader in these situations is to model grace under pressure, to find ways to deescalate conflict, to disagree well, and to seek common ground.

One way that I have found helpful is to deploy the “curious not furious” approach. This great parenting tip can be very useful in a church context too.

When we take time to find out the story behind the outbursts, criticisms, or complaints, and when we try to find a way to listen and understand those who take a different stance to us on issues, our empathy and humility can bring not only de-escalation, but closer relationships and more peaceful and fruitful conversations.

4. Be a Creator, not a Complainer

Sometimes I lose patience with politics. Whenever I see power-mongering, backstabbing, and self-serving agendas, I want to vent and rage. Whenever I see people suffering because of the intransigence or indifference of those who are supposed to be leading our country, I sense my growing anger and dissatisfaction desperately seeking an outlet.

I have learned over the years that while venting and complaining on social media might make me feel a little better, it rarely does much good. The only chance I have found for something good to come out for something bad is when I channel my frustrations into problem-solving or solution-finding.

Whenever I am unhappy with the way the UK government treats the poor and vulnerable, especially refugees and children in foster care, I find that lobbying and advocating, sadly, achieves very little lasting impact. Instead, I try to discover and demonstrate credible positive alternatives.

5. Be a Peacemaker, Not a Pot-Stirrer

It is heart-breaking to watch the relationships of people in our churches fall apart. It usually begins with something small, but even the tiniest of cracks can grow rapidly into huge rifts that tear lives and friendships apart.

In some cases, I have seen conflict in churches fester for years and years, slowly infecting everything they try to do. I have met pastors who have seen their congregations dwindle over the differences of opinion on vaccinations, masks, lock down observance, and the response to the death of George Floyd.

Paul wrote to the Ephesian church because he had heard about their conflict, and he was not afraid to tackle it. But before he offered them very specific advice, he took time to remind the believers of everything they had in common: one Lord, one baptism, one faith, and one Father.

Paul’s letter is an important model for us. Jumping straight in to resolve a conflict risks stirring up more negative emotions. Peace-making takes time. We must invest emotionally and spiritually. We must reach out. We must make space. We must offer hope. These things can (and should) come from the pulpit, and they are increasingly important as families, friendships, churches, and communities are increasingly divided by polarisation.

6. Be Media-Savvy, Not Media-Fodder

The media is discipling our congregations better than we are. It shapes, nurtures, and incepts our views about the world. Even if our instinct is to try and extract ourselves from the media maelstrom, the people we want to reach with the gospel and disciple are immersed in it.

Like it or not, those of us who are called to pastor and preach need to find a way to safely navigate the media minefield, and even more so as an election approaches.

To best understand the media landscape, I deliberately subscribe to a wide range of media sources, that cover different perspectives. On social media I follow people with whom I disagree, I read their arguments, and I discuss their viewpoints with a range of people from different backgrounds.

When I preach, I try to quote from a wide range of reputable sources. I try to imagine how my sermon might sound to people from different viewpoints, and I aim to be respectful to both sides of any debate. I try to be clear when I am giving my personal opinion, always acknowledging that my views may need to be revised. I don't always get it right, and sometimes I must apologise or rethink my position.

And so ...

As preachers in a polarized world, we can be very grateful that our God is omniscient and omnipotent, and that Scripture is our trustworthy North Star. Sometimes the verses lead us to tackle topics we might naturally shy away from, sometimes they remind us to speak with humility, and sometimes they compel us to change our perceptions and allegiances. Always, Scripture offers a way forward for peace, even in, perhaps especially in, the most polarised of times.

Krish Kandiah

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