

Sermons at Oak Grove

September 14, 2008

Romans 12:1-2, 13:1-7 and 13:8-10

"Faith & Politics"

By Andries J. Coetzee

Scripture Readings: Romans 12: 1-2; 13:1-7, 8-10

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; ⁴for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. ⁶For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Sermon: “Faith & Politics”

Like most of you, I grew up that there are two topics one shouldn't talk about in public, at family gatherings, or even sometimes among friends getting together: religion and politics. Especially here at church, I am allowed to talk about topics congregants perceive as relating to faith, but not politics. During our recent congregational survey a number of members expressed their dissent in hearing, what they perceive as “politics” from the Oak Grove pulpit.

With the presidential election upon us, the issues surrounding faith and politics have come under greater scrutiny, mainly because of Christians' domination in the 2004 election. For us as mainline Protestant Churches it has been difficult to help our members to speak out on issues as they relate to our faith. During the past years we have been trying to overcome a perceived notion in our culture that one party or candidate can “claim exclusive rights to Christian faith”¹ The same is true for pastors, as was pointed out this past week on our blog: “God Space”, that no pastors “have a monopoly on morality and certainly not on knowledge”². To me, as someone who has grown up in South Africa in the Dutch Reformed Church during the dark years of apartheid, this is a crucial starting point in our conversation as it relates to faith and politics, ... that no one person, institution, or political party can claim a monopoly on morality and knowledge.

¹ Kathy 2008: <http://godspace.oakgrv.org>

² Mark, 2008: <http://godspace.oakgrv.org>

During my High School years I lived in a mindset where one political party and church did claim a monopoly on morality and knowledge, and that is why this conversation regarding our faith and politics is so important to me. From 1994 until 1998 the most human rights violations took place in my country of birth. One of the saddest implications of this abuse of human rights was that it was perceived as taking place in the name of Christ, as the Dutch Reformed Church actively supported apartheid and participated in the drafting of its laws. During these years the Dutch Reformed Church was in such close alliance with the National Party, that it lost its prophetic voice.

Anti-apartheid activist Alan Boesak tells the following story: “On October 19, 1977 I was visited for the first time by the South African Security Police. They stayed from 3:30 AM till 7:00AM. At one point I was challenged by the Security Police captain (who assured me that he was a Christian and, in fact, an elder of the white Dutch Reformed Church) on my persistent resistance to the government. “How can you do what you are doing,” he asked, “while you know what Romans 13 says?” In the hour-long conversation that followed, I could not convince him. For him, as for millions of other Christians in South Africa and across the world, Romans 13 is an unequivocal, unrelenting call for blind, unquestioning obedience to the state.³”

It was in this context that P.W. Botha, the then State President of South Africa talked at the Zion Christian Church, a mostly black church in South Africa, on April 7th 1985, during their Easter celebrations, saying: “The Bible teaches us about man’s relationship with God and man’s relationship with

³ Alan Boesak as seen in: Botha, J 1990: Romeine 13: 1-7. P. 282 -299. in Burger, CW, Muller, BA & Smit, DJ 1990. “Woord Teen die Lig III/1: Riglune vir prediking oor vrede”. Kaapstad: Lux Verbi

his fellow human beings ... This Bible also has a message for the government and the government of the world. Thus we read in Romans 13 that every person be subject to the governing authorities. There is no authority except from God. Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad conduct. Do what is good, and you will receive the approval of the ruler. He is God's servant for you."

Three months after this speech by P.W. Botha, he declared the first State of Emergency in South Africa, and it became illegal, among other things, to disclose the name of anyone arrested under the State of Emergency until the government saw fit to release that name. People could face up to ten years' imprisonment for offences, without any hearing or legal advice. It was laws like this, and the silence and cooperation of the Dutch Reformed Church and its pastors that led to the height of human right abuses during the apartheid years.

South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio⁴ points out that the church's (referring to the Christian church in the world, and not only the Dutch Reformed Church) history as it relates to faith and politics is not good at all, as there are more examples of theological legitimizing of political triumphalism and economical greed.

Even here in the United States we will have to agree that we as Christians struggle to find our voice as it relates to our relationship to the government and politics. The theologian Karl Barth once said that: "God's revolution, not only condemns the tyranny of unjust rulers, it also demands more than

⁴ Villa-Vicencio, C 1994: 185, Political Ethics, in: Villa Vicencio, C & de Grucy, J 1994. Doing Ethics in Context. South African Perspective. Orbis Books: New York. p 185.

what even the most socially responsible government can offer⁵.” It is this theological starting point that should keep the church from getting too comfortable with any politician, political view, or legislation and promotes continual political renewal.

In this regard I feel September 11th was a defining point in our nation’s history, where we the church, supported the government in a process of national unity in confronting terrorism, and in comforting our own nation. Unfortunately, in the process of doing what we felt God called us to do within the suffering and pain felt by the American people, we surrendered our prophetic voice, and are struggling to regain it in encouraging a healthy political debate.

The question we are struggling with is how far we can take our critique of the government, especially after reading Romans 13, saying we are subject to its authority. Commentators agree that we don’t know much about the circumstances under which this was written. We do know that there was some tension between the Roman government and Christians in Rome, regarding the payment of taxes and Jewish national pride. In this circumstance Paul felt it would be best for this group of Jewish Christians to conform to the government. But, based on the Bible as a whole, one cannot say that Christians must be subject to the government in every circumstance, as there are many other examples in the Book of Revelations, Exodus, and the Book of Daniel where believers are called upon to rebel against the authority of the government.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. London Oxford Press 1960, pp 475 – 502) as seen in Villa-Vicencio, C 1994: 185, Political Ethics, in: Ville Vicencio, C & de Grucy, J 1994. *Doing Ethics in Context*. South African Perspective. Orbis Books: New York. p 185.

What is clear from our reading of today and other passages in the Bible is that Christians took their relationship between faith and politics seriously. When Jesus' followers proclaimed that "Jesus is Lord", the oldest Christian confession, it had political implication as to the Roman world where Cesar was Lord, not Jesus. We see this even in the life of Jesus himself. When he prayed the Lord's Prayer "let your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven; and let your kingdom come."

So it appears from the whole of the Bible that there is no one correct way for the church to respond in relationship to the government. What is needed is discernment within every situation as to how we should respond ... when we should say no to a political proposal and when we should say yes.

In a Congregation like Oak Grove, where we have a diverse group of people with differing opinions, it is difficult to find a balance and to include all voices. It is difficult to address the opposing view or its merits⁶, and show members that we have truly listened and taken their view to heart. "Yet we somehow have to discern which are the issues where compromise/coexistence of beliefs is the goal, (and tolerance—or celebration of that diversity—a testament to "All God's Children")....and which are the issues in which, to follow Christ's example, we must take a stand—even though it is disagreeable, uncomfortable or anger-producing to others⁷".

We as Christians, as Presbyterians, and as an Oak Grove community, do not have the option to be silent and complacent in today's culture, especially when candidates or groups claim exclusive rights to Christianity.

⁶ Dan 2008: <http://godspace.oakgrv.org>

⁷ An Interested Reader2008: <http://godspace.oakgrv.org>

It is in this climate we realize that none of us has a monopoly on morality and knowledge; therefore, we need one another to discern the will of God within every situation. In order to do this, we as a community need to find a way to speak the truth in Christ. To me a good place to start is to create a culture within our midst where we can be truthful to one another without being judged and feel that our opinions are heard and valued. This is the goal of our Adult Sunday School presentation: *Faith & American Politics, Liberty and Justice for all*". This election season it is time for us, people of faith, to change the direction and tone of the discussion between faith and politics and we must be the change that needs to take place in order to be a civil society⁸."

⁸ *Faith & American Politics, Liberty and Justice for all*