[ POLITICAL ‘INFAMOUS INNOCENTS’ ]

A Response to the presentation of Dr. Ronald Fowler at the 2011 Doctrinal Dialogue, June 27, 2011 by Dr. Jim Feirtag, Senior Pastor, Parkgate Community Church in Pasadena, TX
Jesus walked the earth in a politically charged atmosphere. In ways that we cannot fully comprehend, nearly everything Jesus ever said or did had simultaneously profound political and spiritual implications. In the same way, as the Church was born and grew up following the day of Pentecost, they were regularly embroiled in situations that had profound political and spiritual implications just like Jesus. Throughout history, this has always been the case. The essential question is and always will be, “If Jesus is Lord, how are Christians to live out their eternal lives while living here on this temporal plane?” How one answers that question has unavoidable political implications.

The church grew up in the midst of persecution from political authorities, was formed while on the outside margins and, therefore, was forced to develop an essentially apolitical identity. Its foundation, reason for existence and eternal mission, though having political implications, were essentially apolitical. Fundamentally, the Church was made up of individuals who were, at their best, children of God and citizens of Heaven. All other things were subordinated to this. Even after Constantine and all the different inter-mingling relationships that have occurred between Church and state since that time, we have never been able to get away from our opening question. Greg Foster, in his book *The Contested Public Square*, argues:

> All branches of Christianity agree that the church is an eternal institution and that its worldly organization should reflect its eternal qualities . . . The Christian claim that the church is eternal ought to be as shocking to us as the Christian claim that God became a human being. The idea that individuals will not have their own independent lives with God in eternity – that eternal life means life as a member of an eternal social institution – is just as alien to our natural religious expectations as God being a helpless infant . . . The equally shocking implication of this idea is that the church is radically more important than the state . . . No other religion makes religious institutions radically more important than political ones, as Christianity makes the eternal church radically more important than the merely temporal state.¹

Wresting with the eternal nature of the Church and the temporal nature of the state is no small thing. Christians who agree on the essential eternal nature of the Church and the temporal nature of the state will still come to different conclusions regarding how to answer our opening question about the implications of Jesus’ Lordship in any given political context.

Dr. Fowler’s paper is a fine attempt to articulate a coherent set of principles for Christians to consider how they should properly engage in political activity. While the two of us may come out in different places regarding certain, specific political issues, I found myself resonating with all of his overarching principles. Let me highlight a few points that I found particularly cogent:

1. In his opening remarks, Dr. Fowler, writes, “I believe in the optimism inherent in the democratic process.” As everyone here knows, Christianity has existed and even thrived in every kind of political system humanity has instituted. The power of the Gospel of Christ has absolutely nothing to do with given political institutions or cultural systems. While there is no perfect political system because all of them have been corrupted to one degree or another with the stain of sin, I agree that liberal democracy has been, is and likely will be the

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single best political system devised by human beings. It has the greatest potential to provide for prosperity, equal opportunity and justice for all its citizens. Additionally, liberal democracy provides for the greatest amount of peace and freedom as well as the most fertile ground for our spiritual growth and well being.

2. Dr. Fowler also reminds us that as Christians we are “in a very real sense responsible, not for the predicament of others, but for the affirmation of their humanity.” The way we interact with others in the name of Jesus should always have the power and potential to turn “nobodies” into “somebodys.” The presence of Great Commandment love growing in the lives of God’s people is evident in the way they reach out and interact with others beyond themselves. That love is the mark of their Christian character. William Wilberforce writes, “Christian character is to be a reflection of living in relationship with a holy God.”2 If there is not a discernable, growing love for God and people in our lives, then we most certainly are not living in that relationship with a holy God. However, as we grow in Christ, meaning as we grow in His love for people, we will find ourselves more engaged in the world around us. As Richard Stearns contends, “Being a Christian, or follower of Jesus Christ, requires much more than just having a personal and transforming relationship with God. It also entails a public and transforming relationship with the world. If your personal faith in Christ has no positive outward expression, then your faith – and mine – has a hole in it.”3

3. As Christians, we must always be people of truth and light. There are no exceptions to this position, especially when we engage in political pursuits. Dr. Fowler made this clear when he writes, “The pursuit of truth provides a moral compass to guide individuals away from acts which undermine the visibility of God and the trust of others.” Later he says, “The greatest contribution will always come from dialogue in a blame-free atmosphere between those who are open, honest, willing to remain fixed on truth and the greatest good.” While I could not agree more, I must point out that in my thirty-four years of life, I have never seen this occur in our political discourse, to our very great shame. One doesn’t have to look very hard to see the evidence of this. For eight years, President George W. Bush was subjected to some of the harshest, most unrelenting and mean-spirited criticisms of any president in our history. Some of his supporters took to his defense, arguing that the office of the president deserved greater respect and trust, while his detractors never missed an opportunity to exploit a weakness, take a comment out of context or to spin some bit of news to their advantage. Now that President Barack Obama has been in office for two and a half years, the tables have been turned. The same defenders are on the attack using similar tactics that they once decried while the former critics defend the new president in the manner they once scoffed at. While this has become the baseline for our political discourse, it must be recognized by Christian people as nothing short of sin. We cannot control all that happens around us, but as followers of Jesus Christ we can and we must control what comes from our mouths. If our political speech and our political tactics are so linked with those of the rest of the world, we succeed in soiling the good name of Christ and wounding the righteous causes we are engaged in. The cause of Christ always deserves men and women who stand for truth first and always even if that means losing an opportunity to gain an advantage in a political battle.

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4. Dr. Fowler rightly counsels, “Sitting out political engagement is not a viable option for followers of Christ. All followers are called to active participation in the leavening work of improving the human situation for all.” Whether the cause is one of social justice, care and concern for the poor and impoverished, standing up for the innocent or the unborn, or defending causes that uphold the basics of biblical morality, Christians have an obligation to speak out and work for positive results. Of this there can be no doubt. In his letter to the clergy of Birmingham, Martin Luther King wrote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Obviously speaking out and working for positive change can make someone appear to be a radical, especially to the self-centered and self-absorbed majority around us. However, a Christian that is permeated with the love of Christ will embrace the charge of being a radical. King continues, “The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?” As Christians, we have made Jesus the Lord of our lives and His ways are thereby adopted as our own. That leaves us with what the apostle Paul called the “debt to love one another.” That debt, born out of a heart of thanksgiving for what we have already received and continue to receive from God, through Christ, compels us to act.

5. The character of our political leaders is crucial. Unfortunately we have elected men and women who often care more about entrenching themselves in positions of power than they do about the public good. In order to maintain that power, they are ready to pay any price. That is why Dr. Fowler’s words about humility are so poignant. He writes, “Political engagement requires a continuous practice of humility.” Christians must resist the all-too-common temptation living in our political discourse to prop ourselves up as being next to omniscient. Clearly we do not have all the answers. Clearly, there are times when our best and most sincere efforts have not achieved the results we wanted and hoped for. Instead of becoming entrenched like is so often the case today, we Christians can lead the way to a principled debate of ideas that may result in a paradigm shift from past policies we once defended, but may produce a result that achieves our overall desired ends. In so doing, we may not “get the credit.” However, as Christians we are people who have rejected the way of pride, what C. S. Lewis called “the Great Sin,” for Jesus’ way of humility. Lewis goes on to say, “A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you.” As Christians, we are always “looking up” to Jesus and His higher, truer and better ways. We play from a radically different scorecard than the rest of the world and through our humble manner we can teach the world that Jesus’ scorecard is the right, best and only one to play by.

In the concluding portions of his paper, Dr. Fowler asks a powerful question, one that is in line with the basic question about the implications of Jesus’ Lordship that I asked at the beginning. As he spoke about the character of Jesus and the Church that followed Him, Fowler asks, “Can

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5 Ibid.
6 Rom. 13:8
she [the Church] join God in embracing the human condition and working to bring about new order that is commensurate with love and laws of the land?” I believe that the Church can and that the Church must do just that, but in a way that always honors the Lordship of Jesus. With that in mind, I will conclude my response by attempting to answer his question.

Throughout the history of the Church, especially after the time of Constantine, there has been a constant tension over the proper role of God’s people in the affairs of the state. To what degree is it appropriate for the Church to support and defend the power of the state, and to what degree is it appropriate for the state to support and defend the mission of the Church?

One of the ways this question was answered was through the “two swords” theory put forth by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302. Boniface believed the Church was in possession of “two swords,” the secular and the spiritual. The spiritual sword is wielded directly by the Church through the power of the clergy while the secular is wielded by the state under the direction of the spiritual power of the Church. The secular must always submit to the spiritual, and the spiritual has the right to judge the secular when it does not act properly. In that way, both swords are ultimately under divine authority. This gave the Church, through the Pope, supremacy over the kings and princes of Europe. In that manner, the interests of God were always superior, and the laws of both the Church and the state would be one. In theory, this meant that the principles of Jesus’ Kingdom would be realized on earth through the combined power of godly men in authority of both the Church and the state. However, due to the corrupting power of sin, this was never so.

Another answer, born out in the Reformation period, sought to again provide a stable marriage between the Church and the state. This theory first appeared at the Imperial Diet in Augsburg in 1555, known as “cuius regio, eius religio: ‘he who rules, his religion’.” Practically, this meant that there would be one unified religion under one ruler. In this way, the state would have the power and responsibility to enforce both religious and civil laws. Even when the Church acted, it did so only with the state’s approval. This theory presupposed there would be godly political leaders to head the state, but again the corrupting power of sin made sure that was never so.

In both of these answers, it was believed that with one united Church and one godly ruler there would be fertile ground for the salvation of souls and the establishment of a just and moral society based on Kingdom principles. In reality, the rife corruption of both political and church leaders, the bloodshed of many religious wars, the countless number of lives lost as a result of heresy trials and the constant uncertainty and upheaval that occurred depending on a given ruler’s religious preferences made it clear that the current system was broken. Out of this brokenness came John Locke and his paradigm-shifting notion of religious freedom. Locke maintained that there was a universal understanding that existed about the basic premises of morality as well as the notion of basic human rights. Therefore, the state could legitimately govern and promote justice and equity without the presence of one, unified religion. Likewise, it was impossible for the state to have any true role in the salvation of souls because the state could not save people through power and coercion since power and coercion could not produce faith.

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9 Foster, 139.
However, in a society with religious freedom, there could truly be peace, justice and equity as well as the freedom to worship that produced truly fertile ground for the salvation of souls.\textsuperscript{10}

No other single individual had greater influence over the minds of America’s Founding Fathers. In the words of the Declaration of Independence, we see Locke’s influence everywhere. Thomas Jefferson wrote that citizens of the United States, “are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”\textsuperscript{11} This was to occur in the context of religious freedom. Later, in constructing the Bill of Rights to the Constitution, James Madison and others codified this notion writing, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . . ”\textsuperscript{12} With that, America was founded as a republic on Judeo-Christian principles. However, while this system of government has produced the freest, most prosperous and, one could argue, most expressively Christian society in history, even a cursory look at our past can see how the corrupting power of sin has continued to have influence. There has never been a truly Christian nation, and the United States is no exception. So what are we to do?

There has never been nor will there ever be a political system free from the corrupting power of sin and, therefore, our engagement in politics will always need to be aware of this reality. We must remember the words of Hebrews, “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”\textsuperscript{13} Because of this, American Christians must continually wrestle with our opening question: “If Jesus is Lord, how are Christians to live out their eternal lives while living here on this temporal plane?” For this, I offer five brief suggestions:

1. **The Church must always be a prophetic voice for the cause of the Gospel and the principles of Jesus.** As followers of Jesus, our primary mission is to carry out the Great Commission while being permeated more and more with the love of the Great Commandment. As we go about making disciples, we do so addressing the real issues of brokenness in our world that are the result of the systemic corruption of sin – the results of disease from HIV/AIDS to measles, debilitating poverty, abortion, fatherless children, sexual promiscuity, violence, greed and indebtedness, etc. Rick Warren’s P.E.A.C.E. plan, Samaritan’s Purse or the Advent Conspiracy have been good contemporary examples of this.

2. **Christians must conduct their affairs, public and private, political and non-political, by doing the things that Jesus did and saying the things that Jesus said.** While we may be working toward a worthy political goal, we can never allow our political strategies and tactics to surrender the values of Jesus. If we do, we will succeed only in becoming just like the rest of the world. We will be implying that the world’s ways are the only truly effective ways, and Jesus’ ways are just weak or naïve. Instead, we need to be people who carry

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\textsuperscript{10} Foster, 142-171.
\textsuperscript{13} Heb. 13:14.
ourselves in such a way, with honesty, integrity, humility and grace that we look to the entire world as if we are men and women who “had been with Jesus.”

3. As they engage in political discourse, Christians need to avoid the temptation to accommodate to particular political parties. Possibly the most disappointing thing that has occurred for Christians in American political discourse is our sold-out accommodation to certain political parties. I fear that in our pursuit of well-intentioned goals we have allowed ourselves to be co-opted and swallowed up in the system so that we end up operating by its values rather than the values of Jesus. Can Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton work with or praise a Republican? Can Pat Robertson or James Dobson work with or praise a Democrat? Can a liberal, mainline church speak out boldly about abortion or the breakdown of the two-parent family? Can a conservative, evangelical church speak out boldly about HIV/AIDS or social justice issues in the inner-city? When the political parties they are most clearly aligned with ignore the higher values of Jesus, do Christians speak up or walk out in protest? As Christians, we need to avoid allowing ourselves to be too entangled with parties, so we are always free to be tied to Jesus first, foremost and always.

4. Christians must choose their heroes wisely. No matter how much we may sympathize or agree with them, political candidates and commentators are not our spiritual leaders. More often than not, their primary allegiance is not to Jesus as Lord. This means our allegiance should not be to them, especially as it pertains to spiritual and moral issues. Instead, we need to make our champions those who argue passionately and work tirelessly for the God-honoring causes they believe in, while remaining true to the values of Jesus as they go.

5. Christians must maintain a healthy skepticism of the state, understanding that while the state can be a helpful partner, it never possesses the ultimate answer to people’s needs. While the moral fabric of our nation is and should be a concern for all Christians, we must never entrust the state with the fundamental disciple-making mission that can only reside with the Church. Whatever the issue, we need to depend on the state to only protect the “free exercise of religion” and not ask them to promote it in any way. Our role is always to be “salt” and “light.” No state effort can save souls or truly model the values of the Kingdom. Only the Church, through the Gospel, can do that. Only the Church, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through us, can bring true and lasting transformation to individuals, families, neighborhoods, communities, regions and nations.

One historical picture might sum this up perfectly. When the Quakers of New York and Pennsylvania petitioned Congress in 1790 to put an end to the slave trade in America, Representative James Jackson of Georgia stood on the floor of the House and attacked them in a mocking tone. However, his intended insult was more like an unintended compliment. He said, “The Quakers are infamous innocents incessantly disposed to drip their precious purity like holy water over everyone else’s sins.” The Quakers desire to end slavery was based on a love for people with whom they had no personal connection. They were committed to a just, God-honoring cause and a Jesus whom they desired to follow. We should all be known by the same

insult today. I would love to be known as an “infamous innocent” if it means being so for the righteous cause of Christ.