[“IN PURSUIT OF TRUTH: POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY:”A RESPONSE TO DR. RONALD J. FOWLER]

A response to Dr. Ronald Fowler’s Paper by Dr. James Lewis, Professor of Theology and Ethics, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program, and Associate Dean of the Anderson University School of Theology; June 27, 2011
I am honored to respond to Dr. Ronald J. Fowler’s paper, not only because he has written a provocatively passionate paper, but also because as a Christian he has engaged the political process. He is a breath of fresh air; he “practices what he preaches.” More specifically, he has twelve years of public service, most or all of those with the Akron, Ohio School Board. Dr. Jim Feirtag, likewise, has done some heavy theological and historical lifting in his response that was a joy to read for the depth and breadth of its reflections on this significant topic. While there understandably will be overlap in our presentations, I believe the topic is sufficiently complex that none of us could say all we need to say on the topic in a single paper or setting. Hence, we expect and depend on you to reflect along with us as we address this topic that has consumed the thoughts of Pastor-Theologians, professional theologians, political scientists, pop culture satirists, constitutional lawyers, members of the congress, and ordinary citizens of all political persuasions and social status, through every time period of our nation. While this topic is the concern of citizens and Christians of most nations around the world, my comments, however, will refer primarily to life in the United States—the context which I know best.

There was a time in my early life when my response to this moral issue was simply to vote for the party that my family, neighbors, and teachers embraced, since that party was known as the compassionate party for those disenfranchised and marginalized. While some basic sentiments of this perspective rightly remain with me to this day, I would love to believe that I now have begun to think and live out of my primary identity as a follower of Jesus Christ and a participant in the body of Christ—the Church—the foretaste of God’s kingdom. I am first a Child of God, and a citizen of two kingdoms. I am a citizen of this world, but ultimately a citizen of the world to come. As I Peter notes, we are “pilgrims” or “resident aliens” in this world. So our presence in this world as “salt and light” carries significant implications. This is my starting point, the location where I begin my most sober and serious deliberations.

In the remainder of this response, I first will pose several questions that the topic immediately raises for me. Second, I will identify and briefly respond to a few of Dr. Fowler’s observations. Third, I will respond briefly to the six affirmations or principles he offers about
political engagements. Finally, I will provide a bare bones list of some of my observations for our consideration.

**Some Immediate Questions the Topic of Political Engagements Raise For Me**

- Who purports to be the “gatekeepers” of the definition of “politics”? Is it the professional politicians and intellectuals only? Or should the Church and Christians contribute and operate from a “broader” definition of politics?
- What then is politics? Whose politics?
- Despite the definition, should Christians and the Church engage the political process? If not, why not?
- If so, on what basis ought we to engage politically?
- Is the so-called public realm of political processes off limits to explicit Christian discourse and theological commitments? If so, then how are Christians able to engage politics faithfully -- with integrity?
- If Christians are to engage the political process, even as Christians, are we to assume then that all Christians will think the same about the nature of the political process and about the expected outcomes of public policies? Why or why not?
- When we say “political”, do we also include the “economic”? If not, how do we account for the obvious historical relationship between them?
- How does or should worship of the Triune God give us “eyes” to see the world rightly, so that who we are in worship is fundamentally who we are in all contexts of our human life?
- Are Christians rightly charged with being unreasonable and irrelevant if they dare to be informed by their Christian convictions as they enter the so-called “public square”? Is our faith tried and found wanting at the bar of human reason? Says who?
- Meaningful and faithful political engagement requires an informed Church. Should not we as Christians be better informed and conversant about basic economics, party platforms, character and beliefs of political candidates, etc.?
• Are Christians to engage the political arena primarily as “individual” believers, or as some representative of the corporate church, or both? How should biblical preaching and teaching function to prepare believers to be informed and faithful actors in the world

• And I am not through yet, but this is a segue into Ronald Fowler’s paper in that he says in more than one way that political engagements are a “struggle”

A Brief Response to Some of Fowler’s More General Observations on Political Engagements

I love how Ronald Fowler describes his passion as a Christian and how that passion leads him to engagements in politics. He laments the loss or eclipse of robust political debates and the place realism, idealism, sound pragmatism and bold optimism should have in our national political debates. He further laments how cynicism, skepticism, and pessimism make so little space for “virtue,” which he says is a factor inherent in the lives of those who do not give way to these “isms.” Yet, could it be that cynicism, pessimism, and skepticism become the “new” virtues in our politics when our moral compass appears broken, or when we lose the capacity, it seems, to grasp God’s noble vision? He is right, also, to question the muffling or elimination of the “sound of music in our culture.” By this he means the “cacophony of negative narratives” in media outlets. These are voices, however, that embrace competing visions of the good life – a life noble enough to fuel the engines of human flourishing and the common good. While not all our politicians are guilty, there are enough “noisy” sound bites and pervasive sarcasms to obscure shared values, but highlight the supposed “enemies” to be fought and defeated.

Ronald Fowler claims that political engagement in the 21st century is “holy work.” He further says that “engagements [of many types] are the primary (emph. mine) vehicles God uses to advance His kingdom and create transformed communities.” In another place in his paper he tempers this claim—and I am so glad he did-- by saying: “Political engagement is one (emph. mine) of the vehicles for achieving God’s design….” While I am certain of Ronald Fowler’s basic beliefs, I am certain that he would agree, though, that it is God who brings in God’s kingdom. Otherwise, “sanctified” violence in the name of one’s God too frequently results. Jim
Feirtag does a wonderful job in his response indicating the temporality of all human political and economic systems.

Listen to Ron Fowler again when he says that “the pursuit of truth through political engagement is not a cakewalk; it is a demanding, painfully costly and complicated venture.” Amen, Dr. Fowler! My sense is that if more citizens, including more of us Christians would admit to this truth, our politics might be more faithful and certainly more humble, compassionate, and robust. What I appreciate about what I read from Ronald Fowler is that he is a Christian who thinks from within the context of faith and the scriptures of the Church that reveal the Triune God to us and the world. This leads him to affirming the humanity of all human beings, encouraging the church to give visibility to our faith and to the Truth we embody, and to confessing that Jesus both speaks to and interacts with all areas of human life—and, as his followers, so should we.

**Brief Observations on Fowler’s Six Descriptions of Political Engagements**

Ronald Fowler concludes his paper with his observations or principles that he says those committed to the pursuit of truth would do well to consider. To these I now turn:

**First, political engagement is holy work.**

I agree with Ron Fowler that political engagement is “holy work,” with this proviso. The political engagement by Christians is done in the name—under the authority—of Jesus Christ, and guided by the Church’s life and practices. Ron rightly states that this is certainly the case “when the issues involve the honor of God (truth).” I agree. For me, furthermore, Christians and the church must pray for that holy discernment required to name and determine points of convergence and divergence with the aims of our limited political systems. *As Christians, how can we embrace the limiting politics of our nation at all points like so many Christians appear to do today? It seems to me that we cannot do so without losing our very souls in the process.*

**Second, political engagement shares a common struggle.**

It is here that Ron challenges Christians to join the “unattractiveness” of political engagements in the hope of “participating in the leavening work of improving the human
situation for all.” Further, he says our call in political engagements is “to give voice to the marginalized and the oppressed. Giving voice to their concerns is not attractive work and no one is exempt from giving attention to the needs of the poor and oppressed.”

I agree once more with Ron Fowler, as I would with the rich witness of the Christian scriptures, that we Christians should attend to the least among us. I would only deepen his call to include as Chris Huertz and Christine Pohl argue in their book Friendship at the Margins, that relations are central to our engagement in the lives of others. We are not just the good old benefactors of the poor among us, but should be open to becoming “friends” with them—for they too have gifts to offer our common life.

Third, political engagement requires a continuous practice of humility.

This is another helpful section as it rightly identifies the sins of arrogance, self-centeredness, and hypocrisy as enemies of the kind of political engagement in service to the common good. I would like, however, for Ron to say more about his claim that “engagement is by nature democratic.” This begs several questions: “What is ‘democratic’ or in what ways do we affirm that our national polity is truly a “democratic” one? How informed today are Christians about the nature of our democracy? Will Christians acknowledge both its strengths and its limits? Does our democracy entail capitalism, with all of its historical assumptions about the satisfaction of human desires in an ethos of scarcity? This last observation is just to acknowledge that both political and economic engagements involve moral and ethical implications.

Fourth, political engagement is enhanced through cultural exposure.

For me, this is a brilliant and hopeful section. I have nothing substantive to add to this. I challenge the readers to think seriously on this section.

Fifth, political engagement requires courage.

Ron says rightly that “courage—the will to act—is required for truth, equity and justice to prevail in the struggle against injustice.” To his credit, Ron understands that the courage he has in mind is best exemplified in the pursuit of a truth which is “placed in the service of exalting Christ and opening doors of opportunity for others. I want to add to courage the virtues of
patience and hope. Specifically, I note patience with ourselves, with others, and with the “unattractive” process itself. But most of all we need patience to act in light of the truth that God’s kingdom will come and God’s will will be done—on the earth as it is already being done in the heavens. We must with patience await the fullness of God’s kingdom—even though it starts imperceptibly, insignificantly, and invisibly as the very tiny mustard seed and grows into what God desires. While acting courageously, waiting patiently, we then rest in the persistent hope that our salvation/deliverance is not in the “King,” “Queen,” or “Caesar”, but that our hope is in the One in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily. Our hope is in nothing less than Jesus Christ and his righteousness. Even so, Come Lord Jesus.

In our current political climate, it seems that truth is often sacrificed habitually at the altars of expediency, crass political calculations, the tyranny of the urgent, the call to bow to the supposed superiority of party platforms and partisan interpretations of “reality.” It seems to me that “being” the church—an ecclesiological claim—would provide the critical and necessary distance for identifying arrogant or superficial or unexamined claims of our political leaders in order that we might indeed go forward with courage, patience and hope into God’s future.

Sixth, political engagement necessitates a healthy respect for people’s differences.

I was attracted in this section by this statement: “Compromise is etched into the fabric of political and religious discourse. No one should ever be asked to compromise their conscience unless the content of that conscience is obviously ill informed or blatantly at odds with what is good for all!” Ron believes that we need “to pursue a middle ground rather than settle for a stalemate on crucial matters.”

I agree with the nature of liberal democracies like ours as requiring “compromise.” Reinhold Neibuhr saw the strength of democracy as empowering the human capacity for justice. The human capacity for justice makes democracy possible, he said. However, the human capacity for sin makes democracy necessary. No wonder compromise appears so necessary in our democracy, for it enables human good and checks human evil—although not perfectly. Ron does understand that our human consciences must be trained to conform to Christ’s law. The
Church has this task, it seems to me. This is one reason I ask, what about Christians? Should we, in all cases, be content with compromise so that some of what we truly value is publicly enacted? Is it morally justifiable to sacrifice core Christian convictions at the altar of compromise in order to ensure a less than holy end? While “middle ground” may be democratically justified, logically appropriate, and politically pragmatic, must we assume that compromise is the inevitable price we must pay in order to be welcomed participants at the table of our national polity? How might compromise contradict our pursuit and acknowledgement of God’s truth? Could it (possibly) be that faithful Christians doing the hard work of engaging the powers might find themselves only as one-term candidates or candidates subject to recall? I just wonder.

My Personal Observations on our Pursuit of Truth through Political Engagements:

- Embrace your true identity as followers of Jesus Christ, who find ongoing life in the body of Christ—the Church, and are formed continuously through its life and practices [e.g., corporate worship—gathering, prayer, scripture reading, singing, proclamation, baptism, Lord’s Supper, Foot Washing, responding to the proclamation, witnessing, serving, gift-giving, testimonies, etc.]
- Embrace God’s vision for the world as your primary vision of society [See Rev. 7:9-17]. What the church is called to be and is “becoming,” God desires for the “world” also to become
- Live out a broader definition of “politics” that is a more expansive form or structure of life than the more narrow politics identified solely by political parties, interest group politics, the mantra of “one person-one vote” [or more accurately, “one dollar-one vote”], etc.
- Live out a broader application of “patriotism” to include those who love the nation in ways other than a blank check approval for wars often waged by nation-states in service to less-than-noble aims
- Beware then of unqualified and absolute allegiance to the nation and to the agendas of our nation’s political parties
• Celebrate, highlight, and partner with others – whomever God chooses to call -- who share similar passions for human flourishing in the your communities and in the world
• Pray for spiritual discernment to know in what ways we ought to be in support of our nation’s goals and the quest for justice, and in what times we need to resist acceptance of certain public policies and claims inherent in limited political agendas.
• Honor and pray for all our nation’s leaders that they will strive to do whatever conforms to God’s righteous laws. But do not worship them. Worship God alone. To do other than this is idolatry.
• So engage the world for sure – but only on God’s terms
• Know that the world in which we all live and work needs the public and faithful witness of Christians to provide the embodiment to our most deeply held convictions
• We cannot and must not surrender our moral duty only to professional politicians and others who are “influencers”, but must cover them with prayer even as we speak and witness to them with a faithful-prophetic word spoken out of a more truthful story about God, human nature, all of creation, the end-times (eschatology), etc.
• Then maybe through such faithful engagements, God will choose to reveal glimpses of the kingdom of God in the midst of temporal existence

Again, I join Dr. Feirtag in thanking you, Dr. Fowler, for your years of faithful service to the church and to the world, even in your political engagements in the Akron, Ohio communities. Thank you for your paper. What a gift!