

Love, Power, and Justice

Church Conflict and Public Policy

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The #3 reason that people outside the church don't go to church, and that people inside the church are considering leaving the church, is that *church people are always fighting with each other*. (The first reason is that they don't respect church leaders, and the second reason is that the church only talks about money).

One would think that this would make churches pause for thought before leaping into the fray of public policy debate. Clearly, it hasn't. Everywhere I go, I find congregations and denominations fighting, spitting, and splitting over a multitude of causes and issues. Every church feels compelled to make public pronouncements. Every church insists on decision, resists neutrality, demands agreement, and enforces compliance. The result is enormous conflict.

What strikes church outsiders most powerfully is the vitriolic meanness of church conflicts. Factions, parties, and advocacy groups of the world are expected (sadly!) to fight viciously for their point of view. One does not expect the church to fight viciously for a point of view. Whichever liberal or conservative side "wins" the debate, the church as a body is the inevitable "loser". Pastors, church planters, and denominational leaders feel trapped in this escalating warfare.

Is there anything you can do as a congregational or denominational leader to guide the church through these perilous times? Here is reflective process that might help.

Where is the love?

There are many different kinds of love, but the love that is most relevant to shaping public policy is *compassion*. Compassion is divine sorrow, grief, or suffering in sympathy with the broken, lonely, lost, dying, abused, trapped, and/or discarded people of the world. Only the heart of God is big and strong enough to have compassion for the whole world and all the nations, races, and lifestyle segments within it. For Christians to claim compassion "for the world" is arrogance.

Only Jesus could weep for the world. We Christians can only bear to weep for someone or some group in particular. However, weep we must. Public policy is born out of weeping. It is born out of a genuinely felt sorrow for another human being. It does not start with principles, ideals, or abstractions. It emerges from relationship, empathy, and yearning for grace.

In the eyes of the public, the credibility of the church is lost when its internal conflict loses sight of genuine compassion for the other. There is no weeping, but only anger. Even the stories that we tell are not actually *our* stories, but somebody else's story. We have no personal, intimate experience of the issue about which we claim some authority. We leap into the fray of human rights with balled fists rather than open hands.

In doing this, churches reveal to the public (and even to those that it claims to defend), that they are really motivated by love of self rather than love of another. The church cares little for the other, but only to defend their assumptions or expand their influence. The people we so vehemently defend before the vote will be quickly forgotten after the vote, as self-satisfied church members celebrate a victory of principle and go home to lunch.

Therefore, make *love* your entry point into the debate over public policy. And let that love be genuine ... with real tears, and authentic relationships and genuine empathy with *all* the victims of an intolerable situation and not just with *some* of the victims of an intolerable situation. If there are no tears, and if you are not truly motivated by divine sorrow, the church has no place in shaping public policy.

Who has the power?

There are many different kinds of power, but the power that is most relevant to shaping public policy is *compulsion*. Compulsion is the ability to enforce a point of view or behavioral expectation at the time, and in the manner, and for the outcomes of the powerful.

The power of God is *persuasive*, but the power of the world is *coercive*. And the church is both above and within the world. It is always tempted to exercise power *coercively*. It may be that governments can and must act coercively to protect life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But should churches behave like governments?

In the eyes of the public, the credibility of the church is lost when it abandons the *persuasiveness* of God for the *coercion* of the world. The imposition of authority either by a hierarchy, or by the tyranny of the majority, is not the way of God. It denies the possibility of neutrality. It takes away the importance of prayer. It artificially stops conversation, and therefore denies the possibility of spiritual growth and personal transformation.

When churches impose public policy on their own constituencies ... and by extension on any newcomers who might be seeking Christ in their midst ... and by extension on the neighborhoods, families, and individuals around them ... they deny themselves. They are no longer churches. They are just one more political organization competing for control.

Therefore, let the power of God flow through the church, not the power of the world. Churches may take a public stand on an issue or for a particular policy. They do so rarely, and in fear and trembling. Their decisions emerge more from corporate prayer and individual listening, than from factional debate and statistics. If there are no prayers, and if you do not allow for the possibility of spiritual growth, transformation, human error and divine grace, the church has no place in shaping public policy.

What is the justice?

Public policy is about justice, but there are several kinds of justice. The world seeks either *legal vindication* (which ensures that every person gets exactly what they deserve); or *proportionate justice* (which redresses wrongs and reasonably compensates the powerless).

The Realm of God does not deny the importance of legal vindication or proportionate justice, but strives for an even higher form of justice. Call this a more creative or redemptive justice. It is the justice that walks the second mile, sacrifices coat and cloak, forgives persecutors, and plucks out its own offending eye. God's justice is radical forgiveness and ultimate sacrifice for the sake of reconciliation of enemies and reunion with God.

Which "justice" is the goal of the church in shaping public policy? In the eyes of the public, the church loses credibility when it limits itself to goals of the world. The church is condemned by the public whether its policies are "liberal" or "conservative" on any particular social issue, because the public sees the church abandoning its higher quest for justice for the sake of a limited justice. "Liberal" or "Conservative" doesn't matter. The church is inevitably judgemental! And people will feel *justified* in leaving the church behind because they yearn for a higher, more creative, and more redemptive justice.

This is the ironic result of the contemporary involvement of the church in public policy. The church ceases to be the church, and becomes yet another authoritarian voice telling people what to think and what to do. Of course, the "losers" in the debate leave the church. The irony is that the "winners" of the debate *also* leave the church. This is because whether the church has done the "wrong thing" or the "right thing", the church has ceased to be the church. The public, who are yearning for God and a higher justice, go elsewhere.

Can Your Church Emerge with Credibility?

People who follow my writing and work will recognize in this brief article my lifelong debt to the mentoring of Paul Tillich. He wrote a book of the same title in an earlier time of factional debate about human rights. The fact is that the church emerged from the public policy debates of the 1950's and 1960's *as a weaker church!*

There is, after all, only one essential human right. It is the right of every human being to be treated as a human being. A human being is more valuable than a cause, principle, ideology, dogma, tradition, or institution. The right of a human being to be treated as a human being is preserved as much in the *process* of debate as in the *outcome* of debate.

Indeed, the *way* we debate often negates whatever results from the debate. What does it say about church people that we defend the human rights of others by consistently denying the one fundamental human right to be treated as a human being? What does it reveal to the public that in the process of advocating human rights, we denigrate, slander, and dehumanize the people with whom we are debating?

The point of public policy is to use the law in order to bless people. The reality of public policy debate is that we use people in order uphold a law. The church is particularly vulnerable to this criticism. This is not solved simply by parliamentary procedure and a veneer of civil discourse. It is only solved by embracing our shared humanity ... above and beyond disagreements about principle and practice. Inevitably fallible, Christians yearn for truth that will never be perfectly expressed by any public policy. Justice does not lie in winning the debate, but forgiveness by God. If we are to witness to anything in the public domain, let us witness to that.

Can your congregation or denomination enter the fray of public policy debate ... and still be the church? The risks are enormous. Nevertheless, if you start with tears rather than principles ... and follow persuasion rather than coercion ... and aim beyond retribution to reunion ... you might (possibly) preserve your identity and keep the respect of the public.