**Removing Politics from the Church**

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While I was having lunch with a few friends recently, the conversation turned, as it often does to current events in the Synod. One of our little group sagely commented on how lamentable it was that there seems to be so much politicking in the church today. The rest of us nodded our heads in sober agreement. As I thought about our conversation later, however, our brief discussion caused me to reflect on the nature of politics in the Church, and what it means for the Synod today.

**Understanding Politics**

To understand how to rid the church of politics, one must understand what politics are, and how they arise. Perhaps it will be easiest to understand how politics affects the church if be begin with politics in the civil realm.

For nearly five years I represented the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in Washington D. C. as its director of the Office of Government Information. I doubt that this experience gave me any special insight into Synodical politics, but it certainly helped me to appreciate what the political process is all about in the civil realm.

Politics, simply put, is the art of living together in a human community. The word is related to the Greek word “polis” “city” and refers to all of those activities in the realm of human interaction that are required to allow people to live together in communities. In the civil realm, politics occupies the space between anarchy and dictatorship, between each man being a law unto himself and one man imposing his will upon others through force majeur *(responsible)*. Between the law of the jungle and the totalitarian state are all of those untidy societies in which people must struggle to find a way to live together in peace, justice, and prosperity despite their differences. This struggle is what we call politics.

In this struggle to find a way to order our common like, different versions of what constitutes a good society arise. Political parties come into being when groups of individuals share a vision of that they believe society should be like, a vision typically shaped by some combination of political and economic ideologies. Those who hold to a particular vision of society organize into groups and work to bring about their vision. These different visions of what constitute the good society lead directly to the passions, the debates, and the conflict that characterize the political process.

Americans are probably a little too hard on their politicians. We often decry the way in which politicians “spin” the truth to their own advantage and we are inclined to say that all politicians just out for power or personal glory. Yet few people enter government service, either as elected officials or government staff, for the sake of personal power and glory. Most people enter politics because they care about their country and their community. They genuinely want to try to make our nation and world a better place for themselves, their children, and their neighbors.

Understanding these things about politics in the civil realm gives us a perspective from which we can understand how and why politics also happens in the church.

The church in the world is a human community as well as a divine institution. As a human community, the church lives in the tension created by the fact that the kingdom of God has begun to be revealed in Christ among us, but is not yet fully revealed. As St. Paul reminds us, the “perfect” is not yet come (1 Cor. 13:10). For better or worse, this divinely instituted human community must find a way to order its common life in the world until Christ’s return.

In the civil realm, each society seeks a point of balance between the extremes of anarchy and totalitarianism. The book of Judges characterized anarchy as that state in which each man does what is right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6). To avoid the anarchy of radical religious individualism, the church also seeks to order its life as a human community. Yet in seeking order, the church may not resort to the totalitarianism of a cult in which some anti-Christ asserts absolute authority by virtue of his claim to a direct and personal pipeline to divine truth. Between these two extremes, the church must struggle to order its all-too-often untidy life together under the Word.

But on what basis shall the church order its life? God had given His Word to His Church to reveal Christ and to teach the Church what it is to believe, teach, and proclaim. This Word, however, does not answer every question that arises in the church as it lives out its life in the world. As the church encounters questions to which the Word of God does not speak directly, it uses other gifts such as reason and emotion that God has given us according to our human nature. Yet the church employs these gifts under the guidance of the Word of God.

In the civil realm the conflicting visions of what society is and should be are rooted in differing political and economic ideologies. In the church the conflicting visions of what the Church is (and what the church should be) are rooted in differing understandings of the Word of God. This makes them theological differences.

Politics arise in the church when groups of individuals who share a theological understanding of what they believe the church should be seek one another out and organize into groups. These organized groups work with and against one another to bring about their differing visions.

At the root of things, it is these different theological understandings of what is right for the church that leads directly to the passions, the debates, and the conflicts that we decry as politics in the church. The actions that we think of as “political” are symptomatic of differing theological convictions and commitments.

**Resolving Political Conflict in the Church**

In the church, then, all politics is ultimately about theology. It is necessary to understand and accept this fact, if we are going to know how to eliminate political conflict within the church.

The resolution of the theological conflicts that give rise to politics in the church is never as easy matter.

1) First, it requires agreement over exactly what are the issues of disagreement. Achieving this often proves a difficult task.

2) Then the parties must determine whether each issue is one about which the Word of God provides sufficiently clear and definitive teaching that the church may bind the consciences of its members by establishing public doctrine. Where there is not sufficient clarity in the Word of God to establish a definitive public teaching, the matter may be classified as an adiapheron and fall within the realm of Christian freedom.

In the end there are only three possible solutions to political conflict in the church:

1) The theological understanding of one group prevails over the theological understanding of the other (as in the victory of the Orthodox over the Arians at the Council of Nicea);

2) Both groups agree that the theological understanding that divide them are adiaphora, and must therefore remain open questions (as in the question of whether communion must be distributed in a common cup or whether it may be distributed in individual cups);

3) The groups must divide, each going their separate ways (as in the Reformation).

There is, of course, one other path that is sometimes taken. Churches have invented a virtue they call “reconciled diversity”. Under this banner they ignore disagreements in the hope that they will go away. This is the choice that often appeals most to our human nature. In the church we want to avoid conflict and we are inclined to shy away from it, even branding it as ungodly. While this may appear to be the quickest path to Christian unity and charity, it seldom works in practice because it is not a genuine solution, but merely an exercise in conflict-avoidance. It gives an appearance of unity and charity without their substance. Indeed, it purchases a false unity for a time at the price of theological neglect and compromise on the teachings of God’s Word. In the end it most often merely delays the hard work of resolving conflict, allowing the theological differences that divide us to fester and continue, thereby corrupting the body of Christ with bitterness and mistrust. This makes the work of restoring true unity to the church even more difficult to accomplish.

**Conclusion**

Politics in the church is a tragedy. But the tragedy of politics in the church is not that different groups work to implement their vision of the future of the church. The real tragedy is that theological differences among us have grown to such a magnitude as to give rise to these different groups in the first place. May God grant us the grace to recognize the theological differences that divide us, and the will and the wisdom to know how best to resolve the theological differences that ultimately give rise to the political conflicts between us.

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