



Political Engagement

Introduction

POLITICAL TENSION IN AMERICA is not new. Polarization, anger, and hostility have, to some extent, been part of our culture for centuries. However, the state of our public discourse today is particularly poor. Shaped by social media and the 24/7 news cycle, many Americans—including some Christians—feel obligated to take positions on every topic and to attack those with whom they disagree. Our culture often demands the same from institutions and organizations. The Austin Stone Community Church is regularly asked to make public statements about cultural issues, advocate for legislation, comment on court rulings, and endorse political candidates. What does Christlike engagement in the public square look like? When and how is our church called to speak to political issues?

The answer to these questions first depends on how we define “the church.” In one sense, the church is a *body of believers*, a group of individual Christians committed to following Jesus together. Through this lens, we define “church” by its parts, not the collective. As a body of believers, the church can engage in a number of ways. We believe the Lord has called every one of His followers to use their resources—including their constitutional right to vote, protest, and petition—to glorify God and serve all people, including the voiceless and vulnerable. The *institutional church* looks much different. It is a visible and aggregate representative of the body of believers belonging to The Austin Stone. Elders at The Austin Stone are responsible for preaching the Word of God, identifying and refuting heretical teachings, protecting sound doctrine, and preserving The Austin Stone’s distinct gospel witness to the

unbelieving world. The Austin Stone is also a legal entity recognized by the state of Texas and required to follow the laws and regulations applicable to all 501(c)3 organizations. Because the institutional church’s function, role, and responsibilities differ from those of the individual believer, its relationship with the public square is usually different as well.

The Austin Stone exists first and foremost for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ. Consequently, sharing the gospel and making disciples is and always will be our primary objective. We must remember that the church is married to Christ, not a political party. “Jesus is King” is our banner, and it is that declaration that sets our loyalty not to the left or the right, but above. However, Scripture often compels us, both as an institution and a body of believers, to bring a Christian perspective to the political conversations of our day. Because of our deep love for God and others, we will publicly denounce blatant injustices, come alongside victims, and advocate for human flourishing. True biblical justice is both reactive and proactive in nature. The Hebrew word *mishpat* captures what pastor Tim Keller describes as “rectifying justice,” a justice that punishes wrongdoers and “deliver[s] from the hand of the oppressor” victims of theft, abuse, exploitation, and dehumanization (Jeremiah 22:3). However, *mishpat* alone does not fully capture God’s heart for justice. We are equally committed to “primary justice” (*tzadeqah*), a “behavior that, if it was prevalent in the world, would render rectifying justice unnecessary, because everyone would be living in right relationship to everyone else.”¹ This means we are not only passionate about ending in-

1. Tim Keller, “What Is Biblical Justice?” Relevant Magazine, August 23, 2012, <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/what-biblical-justice/>.

justice, but also promoting flourishing by ensuring all people have the opportunities, resources, and relationships they need to thrive materially, socially, and spiritually. Political engagement is an important way to help our neighbors and cities live in true peace and become all that God created them to be.

How can we best advocate for this kind of justice through civic engagement? Below, we identify the two most common political “ditches” experienced by Christians, and then we discuss the proper political duties of The Austin Stone and her partners.

Two “Ditches” of Christian Political Engagement

Total Removal

Some Christians fear that to speak truthfully about civic issues is to take the church’s eyes off of its ultimate mission to make disciples. Consequently, they might remove themselves from the public arena entirely. Many believe that because Christians have a new eternal citizenship in heaven, they are freed from the responsibilities associated with this world’s social, economic, and political structures. Though these individuals may indeed be saved by the *proposition* of the gospel, to stop here would be to disobey its *imperatives*. We believe Scripture’s call to political engagement is clear: we are in fact “sojourners and exiles” in this world (1 Peter 2:11), but the Lord has also made us real (though temporary) citizens of the United States, Texas, and our respective communities. God has ordained government to punish wrongdoers and honor upstanding citizens (1 Peter 2:14), and we should leverage the privileges associated with our own forms of citizenship to glorify God and benefit our neighbors.

Many of the Bible’s greatest heroes and heroines both acknowledged their worldly citizenship and took advantage of it. Joseph was put in charge of all of Egypt by the Pharaoh to ensure people across

the globe had enough to eat during a seven-year famine (Genesis 41:41-57). Esther used her proximity to King Xerxes to both thwart Haman’s plans to exterminate the Jews and to commission Mordecai to write legislation protecting their basic rights (Esther 7-8). Even Paul was glad to capitalize upon the legal protection the Roman citizenship afforded him (Acts 16:37; 22:25). Just as these biblical figures blessed others through their civic participation, so too are we to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7). We also engage because we share God’s heart for vulnerable and marginalized people. He is a God of justice, “secures justice for the poor,” and “upholds the cause of the needy” (Deuteronomy 10:18, Psalm 140:12 NIV). Similarly, we are to speak up for the voiceless and the needy, to advocate on their behalf when oppression descends upon them (Proverbs 31:8-9). Political participation is one of many ways we are able to love, not just with our words but “in deeds and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

Though disengagement is often considered a form of “neutrality,” this is far from the truth. In *The Weight of Glory*, author and theologian C.S. Lewis underscores the sobering consequences of our private and public decisions:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses ... All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations [heaven or hell]. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.²

Abstaining from politics is a political statement. When we remain silent, we choose not to engage many of the real social and economic injustices affecting people today. Because well-meaning pastors in America’s past feared “becoming political” and “dividing the church,” they failed to challenge even the most obvious forms of dehumanization, including the institution of slavery and the South’s Jim Crow laws. Evangelism has and always will be the primary objective of The Austin Stone’s cultural engagement strategy. We are a church that is passionate about seeing people come to know Jesus, experience His forgiveness and grace, repent from their sin, and follow Him for the rest of their lives. As people of the Word, however, we must seek the salvation of individuals, the flourishing of their communities, and the rectification of this world’s unjust, oppressive institutions. Jesus’ ministry was characterized by passionate preaching and radical acts of mercy and grace (Luke 24:19; Matthew 4:23). As believers, we are called to speak and serve like Him, so that “in everything God may be glorified

through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:11). We can certainly bless others through everyday acts of kindness. We can and should offer to cook for struggling single mothers, tutor disadvantaged students, and help local immigrants adjust to their new lives in America. These are good and right things to do. However, they alone are insufficient to address the root causes of the hardships, suffering, and injustices those people experience. To address brokenness at the individual *and* systemic levels, our involvement must be both personal and political, engaging our neighbors as well as those who govern them.

Some Christians believe that personal evangelism is the only catalyst for both life change and political change, and that enough renewed hearts and minds will produce the social momentum needed to repeal dehumanizing laws and replace oppressive structures. However, Godward changes in our culture require God’s people to engage with these structures and the people who have the power to change them. History shows us that culture is typically shaped on a stage much larger than our small personal worlds. As Christian theologian James Davison Hunter writes in *To Change the World*, “the deepest and most enduring forms of cultural change nearly always occur from the ‘top down.’”³ He rightly observes that many of Western civilization’s most notable movements—the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Great Awakenings, the Enlightenment, the postmodern era, just to name a few—began among leaders who leveraged their networks to redefine culture. Many of these events multiplied spiritual, intellectual, and material flourishing, but their significant flaws often resulted in the distortion of and our disobedience to God’s Word and Spirit as well. This is not as it should be. Christians should not limit themselves to individual acts of kindness or leave culture-building to those

2. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 45-46.

3. James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.

outside the faith. With sound preaching and a public gospel witness, individual Christians—as well as Christian institutions—can work with those in positions of power to create a society that honors religious liberty, affirms God’s sexual ethic, and acknowledges the dignity of every human being from conception to natural death.

Total Immersion

While some pastors choose not to speak on any political and cultural issue from the pulpit, others are over-eager to “apply the gospel” to contemporary issues. Though the Christian call to engage is clear, pastors too hasty to tie Scripture to every public matter may inadvertently (or intentionally) find themselves “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9). When church leaders speak just as passionately about tax rates, gun control, and border security as they do about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, political rhetoric can completely eclipse the message of the gospel, “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Loyalty to a country, party, or movement should never become greater than our allegiance to King Jesus. When political affiliations define us more deeply than our shared identity in Christ, the family of God becomes divided by distrust and hostility. We no longer see fellow believers as brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers (1 Timothy 5:1-2), but enemies to be defeated or sinners to be “converted” to our worldview.

This is not as it should be. The gospel is the bond that ties Christians of all backgrounds together, the reality that distinguishes followers of Jesus from those who hate the light and refuse to enter into it (John 3:20). We must take great pains to ensure that the bride of Christ never becomes overidentified with earthly affairs or co-opted by worldly agendas. The church is far more than a nonprofit

or advocacy group; it is an earthly embassy of the kingdom of God, and its members are ambassadors charged with carrying the good news of Christ to others. Without Him, the church has nothing unique to offer to the world—no gospel hope, no gospel peace, and no gospel life. In the book of Matthew, Jesus tells us that salt that has lost its saltiness “is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet” (Matthew 5:13). Jesus follows this by telling His disciples to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

To avoid this ditch, we must remember that our treasure is found in heaven, not in worldly riches or authority. In 1 Peter 2:11, Paul implores his readers to “abstain from the passions of the flesh,” including the worldly desires for power and control. When we lose sight of the kingdom of God, we behave as “... children, tossed to and fro by the waves carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Ephesians 4:14). Unless we tether ourselves to Christ, we become vulnerable to exploitation by politicians and parties only interested in their own glory and success. It is Jesus alone who allows us to speak prophetically to the culture. It is Jesus alone who allows us to honor public figures when they love those they lead well and then challenge those public figures when they do not. It is by critiquing *and* celebrating that Christians can show the culture that we are both against injustice and for all that is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). When we put our ultimate hope not in politicians and policies but in Jesus alone, relevance and influence lose their luster, and kingdom work begins in earnest. “If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that that

have become so ineffective in this.”⁴ God’s promises provide far greater assurance than any politician’s pledge or social movement’s mission. Eternally secure in the arms of Jesus, believers are free to love God and love others with all that we have.

The gospel gives us the confidence we need to stand firm in our convictions, as well as the humility we need to respect, listen to, and empathize with other people. When we embrace the power of the Holy Spirit, we learn to love all who bear God’s image and embrace believers who disagree with us on “disputable matters” (Romans 14:1 NIV). When Christ becomes more precious than power, we learn to love even our enemies and to serve and pray for those

who persecute us and wish us harm (Matthew 5:44). When we cling to the Lord instead of our politics, we preach a gospel that transcends the partisan divide. “When we tie our message too closely to a political platform,” notes pastor J.D. Greear, “we put an unnecessary obstacle in the way of the gospel for half our mission field.”⁵ While we have a Christian duty to seek justice for our neighbors through faithful political engagement, our ultimate loyalty must lie only with Christ—our true strength, our safest refuge, and the horn of our salvation (Psalm 18:1-2). This means that God’s Word must serve as the cornerstone for our speech, our public statements, and our activism.

How Christians Engage

AS THE KINGDOM OF GOD’S earthly outpost, the church is the tangible demonstration of God’s heart for the economic, social, and spiritual flourishing of all people. Theologian and pastor Charles Spurgeon was explicit in his indictment of churches unwilling to take up this task:

A church which does not exist to do good in the slums, and dens, and kennels of the city, is a church that has no reason to justify its longer existing. A church that does not exist to reclaim

heathenism, to fight with evil, to destroy error, to put down falsehood, a church that does not exist to take the side of the poor, to denounce injustice and to hold up righteousness, is a church that has no right to be.⁶

What does this look like for The Austin Stone? Below, we explore the different yet complementary ways in which individual Christians and institutional churches can participate in politics for the glory of God and the welfare of others.

4. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 134-135.

5. Michael Gryboski, “JD Greear warns South Baptists ...” *The Christian Post*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/jd-greear-warns-southern-baptists-against-becoming-political-party.html>.

6. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons on the Death and Resurrection of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 294.

Role of the Individual Believer

In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul implores followers of Jesus to “be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1). However, citizens of the United States live not under an emperor with absolute power like Caesar, but in a democracy in which we yield to authority while wielding authority at the same time. As Thomas Jefferson penned in the Declaration of Independence, our government was “instituted among Men, deriving [its] just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁷ For the American Christian, political participation is not simply an option we have, but a means for us to bless our communities. We must not take this responsibility lightly. God gives us the freedom to engage in this way, and He fully expects us to make the most of it (Luke 12:48).

The Lord is passionate about justice and dignity, and He instituted government to “bear the sword” and serve as “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:4). In our democracy, citizens elect many civil authorities and lend them the power they need to perform their roles. In other words, believers help decide who “bears the sword” on our behalf, and we are responsible for keeping them accountable when they use it poorly. The Lord despises wicked rulers but is glorified when upright leaders seek the welfare and prosperity of their people (Isaiah 10:1). “When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God,” writes the prophet Samuel, “he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth” (2 Samuel 23:3-4 ESV). Today, followers of Jesus have the opportunity to bring God glory by elect-

ing leaders and supporting policies that promote human flourishing, advocate for the vulnerable, and promote healthy public discourse.

Believers are also to practice charity with one another, “to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people” (Titus 3:2). Faithful Christians who share the same goals can, and often do, differ on their preferred political strategy. In these instances, we are to, in accordance with the Golden Rule, give other believers the benefit of the doubt and assume their intentions are good (Matthew 7:12, 1 Corinthians 13:7). Disagreements on secondary issues should not be used by church leaders to exclude individuals from church life, but to help them to grow in their sanctification and understanding. The world around us has been torn apart by self-interest and self-aggrandizement. Suspicion and cynicism reign, leaving wrecked relationships and fragmented communities in their wake. The church is not to conform to the ways of this world, but rather, bring light into it and put the redemptive power of the gospel on full display (Matthew 5:14). For the sake of the church’s witness, we are to approach other believers “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3). In all that we do, we must, as theologian Rupertus Meldenius first wrote in 1626, “keep in necessary things Unity, in unnecessary things Freedom, and in both Charity ...” If we approach politics in this way, he writes that “our affairs would certainly be in the best condition.”⁸

7. Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” 1776, retrieved from <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

8. James J. O’Donnell, “A common quotation from ‘Augustine’?” Georgetown University, accessed September 2020, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/quote.html>.

Role of the Institutional Church

As an institution, the church's capacity to speak to contemporary political topics is more limited. Some issues in the Bible are considered "straight-line" issues—issues on which there is a "straight line" from a passage of Scripture to a specific policy solution. In these instances, the position is not just informed by personal opinion, but handed down to us by God Himself. For example, the Bible is clear about the dignity of all people and the sinfulness of murder. Because activities like abortion and lynching willfully and intentionally take innocent human life, the institutional church can, with biblical authority, condemn these injustices publicly and work towards their abolition.⁹ When it is appropriate for our church to speak to one of these subjects, statements and guidance will always come from the elders through formal means of communication and commendation. As teachers, church leaders must ensure Scripture is understood as the primary source of truth (James 3:1-2). If our church elders issue a definitive statement on a particular policy or political position, it is to say that we believe the issue to be a straight-line issue and that viewpoint to be the clear, biblical perspective.

However, many injustices we see and experience every day—poverty, racism, and others—are considered "jagged-line" issues. This means that God's Word gives us a clear *moral obligation* to do something about them, but it does not clearly show us *how* they should be solved. When pastors use their formal offices to prescribe policy solutions to jagged-line issues, congregants may erroneously

consider those claims equally as authoritative as the straight-line directives given to us in God's Word. Though the church certainly has the power to bind consciences where Scripture is clear, it does not have the right to do so where ambiguity remains. "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves)," wrote Martin Luther in 1521, "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."¹⁰ On jagged-line issues, the institutional church's role is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:12) by:

- Providing the theological foundation needed to navigate complex issues
- Helping partners develop the character required for fruitful Christian engagement
- Offering wise and godly counsel to those looking to grow in understanding
- Teaching partners how to discern (for themselves) which candidates or policies are best

As the perfect teacher, Jesus took a similar approach. Rather than responding to specific problems with direct prescriptions, He provided more general insight into mercy, justice, and community (Luke 12, John 6). It is through practice of the spiritual disciplines and the work of the Holy Spirit that our consciences will be formed, allowing us to "discern

9. While many pregnancy complications can be remedied without abortion, there are some instances in which a pregnancy poses a real threat to the mother's survival (e.g. when the mother has a cancerous uterus or experiences an ectopic pregnancy). In these cases, allowing the baby to grow to term may actually result in the death of both the mother and baby. Because both the woman and the unborn baby are equally precious in the eyes of God, a choice may have to be made. The agony that comes with such a decision is unfathomable, and incredible prayer and community support is needed.

10. Martin Luther, "Speech at the Imperial Diet in Worms," April 18, 1521, Worms, Germany, retrieved from <https://www.sjsu.edu/people/james.lindahl/courses/Hum1B/s3/Luther-Speech-Worms-1521.pdf>.

what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). As followers of Jesus,

we should be in constant prayer that God would give us “the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” (Ephesians 1:17).

Pressing Onward

THE BIBLE CONDEMNS a number of injustices, from abortion to racism to the oppression of the poor. It also celebrates the flourishing of cities and implores Christians to seek the welfare of the residents of those cities. However, Scripture typically points us to principles instead of particular prescriptions. This means that the institutional church must typically refrain from aligning herself with specific parties, politicians, and proposals. Individual Christians, on the other hand, have been given the freedom to apply their faith to every dimension of their lives, including politics. If we are to be salt and light in our communities, we must reject both full removal and full immersion, and instead bring the lifegiving news of Jesus to a weary world in search of better answers. The elders of The Austin Stone are committed to preparing partners at our church for healthy political discourse in several ways.

Prayer

As Christians, we must pray for those in power, regardless of their religion, gender, race, ideology, or party affiliation. We should want our leaders to do well and to successfully improve the social and economic lives of those they represent. When authorities rule with mercy and justice, writes Solomon, the people rejoice and experience flourishing (Proverbs 29:2). Therefore, we must beg the Lord—both individually and corporately—to give them the wisdom they need to lead in righteousness.

Study of God’s Word

In order for us to honor the Lord through our political engagement, we must read, discuss, pray, and meditate upon His precepts. Without them, we are forced to rely on our hearts for direction, a moral guide “deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9). Because of sin, we often lean on consciences shaped not by the gospel, but “by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition” and “the elemental spirits of the world” (Colossians 2:8). Therefore, we must let Scripture mold our consciences, not the other way around. The Austin Stone is dedicated to helping partners and regular attenders grow in their love for and understanding of God’s Word through Missional Community groups, small-group curriculums, REAP resources, and other tools.