

PBBA <45 Cohort | The Collision between Politics and the Pastorate

The political climate in America is fracturing relationships within many spheres of society. On the day the PBBA <45 Cohort gathered to discuss this topic, a major news headline read, “the National Divorce,” suggesting an irreconcilable break exists between America’s political parties.¹ Such relational strain is not remaining within the halls of government, or even the public square; sadly, such tension is infiltrating the Christian church and creating a collision between politics and the pastorate.

The PBBA <45 Cohort seeks to address this collision as part of its series of toolboxes to serve the church for the rising generation. Their conversation progressed according to the following: 1) a brainstorming session to identify instances where collisions between politics and the pastorate (or the church as a whole) have been observed; 2) a consolidation of the identified points of collision into categories; 3) an identification of possible root causes for each category; 4) responses the pastor/church could take to address this collision. This white paper toolbox will summarize the cohort’s efforts and provide a few resources for pastors and churches to consider.

Brainstorming |

The collision between politics and the pastorate is, sadly, neither limited nor isolated. Many pastors describe the current political-pastorate environment akin to that of a demolition derby instead of a single accident. The following are some of the reasons.

- Not enough support | Congregants express anger at pastors who do not support their preferred political candidate to the degree they feel the pastor should - both in sermons, other public spheres (e.g., social media), and pastoral conversations. Such angry responses have catalyzed members to cease giving and incite relational conflict in the church to the degree individuals and families leave the church altogether.
- Political platforms are split | The platforms of the two primary American parties, Republican and Democrat, have positions that touch on and support biblical values (of varying number and degrees). For example, the Republican Party is known to prioritize the life of the unborn and responsibility of the individual when compared to platform of the Democrat Party. The Democrat Party is known to prioritize systemic justice and group/social responsibility to a higher degree when compared to the Republican Party. (Note: to “emphasize” or “prioritize” a topic/issue does not mean their outcomes are more effective; rather, more attention is given). Further, because there is the presence of historical biblical values promoted in each party (though in varying number and degree), and because followers of Christ decide to prioritize one ideal over another, followers of Christ are found on both sides of the political aisle.
- Split between Morals & Policy | Politicians do not always embody both the values and the morals of the people they represent, even though they put forward policy and legislation that may. For example, a voter may affirm policy put forward by a politician yet disapprove of the same politician’s moral conduct. Likewise, a citizen may approve of the conduct and demeanor of a politician yet be opposed to the policy they put forward and the platform they represent. Because of the tension in the current political climate, some individuals overlook either policy or morals to reaffirm their positions, beliefs, and values. Such a split between moral affirmation or rejection and policy affirmation or rejection creates a tension, both within and between people. Deeper conversations are needed to move toward resolution of such tension so that congregants have clarity as to what is and is not affirmed.
- Stuck in the Middle | The American culture generates deep and abiding pressure for its citizens to choose and align behind a political party, fostering an “Us vs. Them” mindset (e.g., polarization). As Christ followers choose Christ Jesus to be their primary identifier, along with His eternal Kingdom, (which they should), instead of a political party, Christians cannot, must not, fully agree with every facet of either party. As a necessary consequence, many Christ followers feel politically homeless, and stand opposed to this American norm of political identification.
- Pseudo-Christian Nation | Christianity plays a key role in America’s founding framework, though America was not established as a theocracy. The Christian framework has shaped American policy and values despite founding fathers affirming and relating to the tenants of Christianity to varying degrees of theological fidelity. Nonetheless, the national motto, “In God We Trust,” shapes much of the identity of America, and the Christian religion shapes much of the national discussion. However, the Christian faith is embraced personally and cannot be achieved merely by means of a national identity. Furthermore, there is numerous evidence of an increasing

national divergence between historical founding Christian principles and present-day secular ideology. Consequently, America is functionally a secular state that has remnants of a Christian identity. Citizens and church congregants differ on such divergence. It is this disparity that brings about the collision within the pastor and church.

- Patriotic Confession | Akin to above, American patriotism demonstrated toward America has, in some circles, morphed into an expression of Christian discipleship; and, at times, worship (e.g., Christian Nationalism). Varieties in such demonstration is often seen between generations and depending on one's participation in the military.

There are points in America's history when the State's morals were closely akin to those of the Bible; thus, affirming America and its values would echo the Christian faith.ⁱⁱ It is such an affection for the country that endures (which is noble when giving grateful recognition to those who have served and sacrificed); however, as present-day values are increasingly devoid of acknowledging God and the Bible, celebrating all that America currently, functionally, represents has become a challenge. And, regardless of any static or dynamic values of America, patriotism to one's country, regardless of the country, cannot supersede one's allegiance to Christ. Pastors have felt this collision and experienced it to heightened degree when ministering across generational lines (e.g., older generations grew up in a time when values between the Christian faith and the country were more closely aligned) and to those who emigrate from other countries.

- Moral or Political | In their respective efforts to validate political parties' ideals and platforms, and to a greater degree due to polarization within the "us vs we" mindset (e.g., "the national divorce"), political matters are often presented, debated, and discussed as moral issues. Thus, to align behind a party and its pursuit of legislative accomplishment is deemed as a moral decision (to choose another party is to be immoral). Further, as media outlets tend to align behind a particular party, news content is frequently presented as a moral matter, with a political worldview, and viewers exist in a type of echo chamber where they are only exposed to content that reaffirms their personal views and morals. While many matters of legislative and governance discussed by the State have moral roots and implications, neither party, nor any government established by man for that matter, can be viewed as the creator and final authority on morality. Morals flow from the character of God. It is within this collision pastors are labeled as "immoral" by the culture when they exegete biblical standards that are counter to logic presented by their preferred political party (ex., immigration, abortion, justice).
- Emotional Temperature | The tone of the country is heated—angry, hostile, argumentative (usually with a plethora of labels ready to attach). This tone is increasing due in part to social media as feelings are shared, often without a filter, and attacks upon others are becoming the preferred tactic to express oneself. Sadly, it is this emotional tone of communication, a normalized standard of connection, yet void of true community, that collides with the Kingdom unity within the body of Christ, and pastors are stuck trying to sort through the carnage.
- Impacted Preaching and Counseling | Perhaps the greatest fallout of the political-pastorate collision is the impact upon preaching, pastoring, and counseling. Pastors express their hesitancy to teach on various topics because of the repercussions that they anticipate from the politically faithful. They cite the heightened courage it requires to preach what needs to be said.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, it takes the articulate pastor to teach it as many definitions and long-held concepts have been hi-jacked and altered by America's cultural progressives (often under the guise of "your truth" and/or "you do you.") Consequently, terms formerly assumed as universally understood must now be defined. To minimize such collision requires the pastor to think carefully as to how his words may be received and interpreted, while trusting the Holy Spirit to bring understanding.

Categories |

These nine points above of collision between politics and the pastor/church, though not exhaustive, continue to shape pastor ministries and the pursuit of church mission throughout the U.S. These areas can be placed in two categories: The Role of the Pastor and Personal Identity.

- The Role of the Pastor | The collision between the pastor/church and politics can be attributed to how people perceive the role of the pastor. Many congregants (aside from the culture at-large) prioritize personal perspective, which is intertwined with their political preferences, above biblical doctrine. As people connect the arenas of morality, patriotism, and Christian governance

with the political sphere, the pastor and church are viewed to be catalysts of those arenas. Thus, when congregants view a pastor/church as not aggressive, not publicly advancing preferred politics, they are viewed as weak pastors whose pastoral/theological integrity must be questioned.

God has called pastors to equip the saints to serve for the express purpose of advancing His Kingdom, not be catalysts for the advancement of earthly temporal kingdoms. It is this superseding role of the pastor toward the enduring Kingdom that must not be lost.

- Identity | The second category of collision is related to how people view themselves and others. As objective/absolute truth has given way to moral relativism and emotionalism, the source of truth has cast upon the self; consequently, the values of others are reduced. Personal perception, as opposed to universal truth, is seeking to bear the weight of reality, and people are fighting for their perception to be embraced while lacking the ability or willingness to reconcile with the perceptions of others – people with conflicting identities. For example, social media is a sphere where people will express themselves in a manner that tends to disregard others to the hope of protecting self-perception.^{iv}

Root Causes |

1. Biblical Illiteracy | Pastors have observed that many of the politics-pastorate collisions can be attributed to an absence of biblical knowledge. Congregants have taken cultural/traditional statements, thought to be in the Bible but are not, and used them to justify political causes (e.g., “God helps those who help themselves”). Such biblical illiteracy has driven congregants to falsely erect political beliefs upon non-biblical foundations and then to become “evangelists” of such beliefs.
2. Generational + Culture = Worldview | Worldview is the lens one uses to view current events (how you see things vs. what you see). Because there are at least six generations presently influencing society, each having formative years when the relationship between the country and scripture were at different points, and because individuals between generations and cultures are able to interact with greater ease due to social media and other technology, conflict within the church and between God’s people has risen.
3. Sin and Selfishness | Sin is anything less than the moral law of infinitely holy God. That inherited sinful state and corresponding behavior, challenges God’s plan and purpose. While the State (e.g., government) is ordained by God, even the fallen governments and their flawed leaders, sinful behaviors will be ever-present and sin-filled decisions will shape the hearts and lives of citizens. Likewise, congregants, as well as pastors, willfully choose to behave in ways that violate God’s moral law and do so within the church.
4. Prioritizing perspective over plain biblical truth | Moral relativism has supplanted objective truth in many parts of the American culture. This concept is often seen in phrases such as “your truth and my truth,” “the way I see it,” or “I feel/think that...” While the concept of one’s perspective has always existed, it has been normally subservient to objective, measurable, reality. Yet modernity now places the perspective of the individual above objective and biblical truth. Such reprioritization, whereby the individual is the source of truth instead of an objective and reliable truth outside of self (e.g., the Bible), fosters an environment where competing voices claim truth. As such, when the pastor preaches scripture, individuals are filtering, in an ever-growing degree, the biblical message to receive what is in line with their perspective and reject what doesn’t. Consequently, change toward holiness is thwarted.
5. Bad preaching | Poor hermeneutics are a root cause of collisions between pastor/church and politics. Should a pastor practice eisegesis instead of exegesis (e.g., putting in his thoughts to shape the biblical text instead pulling original meaning from the biblical text to shape his thoughts), the priority of perspective over objective truth will be reinforced. As a result, non-biblical traditions will be advanced and sin-laden concepts will be taught while the “contending for the faith that was once delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3) will never occur.
6. Misplaced Hope | There is an internal desire for the Kingdom of God within the heart of man; however, sinful hearts often look for replacements. As God and the church have decreased in the minds and lives of many Americans, along with the guiding role of the Bible, people are looking to local, state, and federal governments as their longed-for kingdom. Thus, people view politicians and their political party as agents to usher in such a kingdom. Such misplaced hope, looking toward and functionally resting one’s faith in earthly kingdoms instead of God’s eternal Kingdom, is fostering numerous collisions that pastors and the church regularly face.

Response |

1. Engage in Christ-like Curiosity | Jesus came for the world to participate in enjoying God's Kingdom and glory, to pave the way for grace to be offered to the repentant – one person at a time. That “one person at a time” was the stride of Jesus's ministry. He stopped to heal the paralytic man, the woman with the bleeding condition, the blind man – one person at a time. In His coming, Jesus emptied Himself of His heavenly attributes (Philippians 2). Though Jesus could have ordered each moment on Him (as it will be for all eternity), Jesus chose to walk intentionally through crowds and invest in others. He took the time to think of others. To listen. To care. To stop and think. To pray. This conscientious attention to the other person is missing today (Christ-centered “otherism”). That type of personalized care, that Christ-like curiosity, is essential if the Pastor-Politics collision will be addressed. Such Christ-like curiosity can drive the following questions:
 - a. How can I lead my church to embody Jesus's attitude as described in Philippians 2:3?
 - b. What does this person standing before me need?
 - c. What may be in this person's life that may be an obstacle or disruption for them flourishing in Jesus?
 - d. How can I serve this person before me?
 - e. How can I work with the Spirit to align this person to God and not merely to my opinion?Possessing such curiosity will require Christ followers to focus on personal relationships more than corporate programs to listen to the Holy Spirit and guide people, one at a time, from diverse backgrounds and politically motivated ideologies.
2. Preach the Word – not Perspective | Preaching according to “the way I see it” is woefully insufficient for this moment (or any moment for that matter). A Kingdom task of eternal significance is at hand, and the wisdom of man will not meet the need. To counter the “my truth/your truth” posture of the secular culture, pastors must recommit and reengage into exegeting the full counsel of scripture. The preaching task is to preach the word in season and out (2 Timothy 4:2), and this moment in American history seems to be more “out of season” than “in”; thus, the urgency of setting aside perspective and logical conclusions is intense and must be the tone of the pulpit (1 Corinthians 2:1-10).
3. Elevate Christ Jesus as The Hope | It is good for the pastor to encourage congregants to vote, to participate in the democratic process afforded Americans; however, the act of voting must not be deemed as the means to bring about the Kingdom of God. Pastors and churches must elevate Jesus as the ONLY hope our Creator has provided. While one can be thankful for politicians and governments to advance matters in line with scripture, our enduring hope must rest in Christ Jesus. Any effort, any means or method, that removes Christ from such a position and seeks to look to government to occupy must be ended – regardless of long-held traditions and present popularity.

Resources |

- Book: “Counterfeit Gospels: Rediscovering the Good News in a World of False Hope” (Trevin Wax & Matt Chandler)
- Book: “Gathering Storm: Secularism, Culture, and the Church” (Albert Mohler)
- Podcast: The Church Politics
- Book and Podcast: “Truth over Tribe” (Patrick Miller & Keith Simon)^v

ⁱ <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/3866590-marjorie-taylor-greene-calls-again-for-a-national-divorce/>

ⁱⁱ There is understanding that various correlations have been made between the Promised Land (Israel) and America, George Washington defeating England with Moses defeating Egypt. Such correlations have historically fostered unhealthy Christian nationalism.

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Chronicles 18:13; Malachi 2:6; 2 Timothy 4:2

² individuals, the self, to relate to truth outside of itself, not be its source.

^v <https://choosetruthovertribe.com>