



## The Country Is Watching

April 5, 2023

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Wisconsin is under the microscope this week. From local school referenda to Supreme Court elections, the country was watching what we would do. Wisconsin's role as a swing state has become increasingly prominent in the last several years. For residents, all this swinging can be dizzying or downright nauseating. The tension between our public life and our private values and faith can leave our stomachs in knots.

Some would argue that our churches should be apolitical. "Don't preach politics from the pulpit." To be sure, advocacy for candidates is off-limits and can threaten our congregations' non-profit status. The protest against politics in the church, however, usually goes far beyond specific candidates. "We shouldn't be debating issues like racism and abortion in our churches," some would insist. Book-banning, transgender bathrooms, and more are all political hot buttons that should be off-limits, according to some.

I've been pondering that, especially when, on the political front, so many lobby for or against particular measures **based on their religious beliefs**. A vocal minority espouses Christian Nationalism, wanting Christianity and the governance of our country to be fully enmeshed to the exclusion of any other faith tradition. Some organized groups purport to uphold Christian values by overtly advocating for political candidates or legislation that they feel best represent their religious views. Most of us, I suspect, would vote against measures abhorrent to our faith.

If our political life is driven by our religious beliefs, then shouldn't we regularly and carefully examine the soundness of our religious beliefs? I don't mean in the abstract, but as applied to the unique challenges we face daily. And, where better to do that examination than in the church?

When political discourse becomes off-limits in our churches, then we run the risk of letting popular culture sway what we believe our faith requires. Heaven knows I benefit from continued study and correction about what Jesus asks of me! The mutual accountability of the body of Christ encourages sound doctrine that we can lose if our discipleship happens in isolation or in echo chambers.

Here's where I'm obviously naïve. As a cradle Presbyterian, I've grown up in a tradition in which we proudly announce that we are the church reformed and always being reformed. We don't take what the pastors says as the gospel truth – so to speak – but as an invitation to engage Scripture. We value wrestling with the text and seeing new applications of those ancient stories. That is not the approach of every faith tradition, and there is danger when single voices purport to speak for the church with no accountability.

My sense, however, is we fear conflict in the church more than anything else. We don't want to find ourselves disagreeing about how to interpret conflicting passages, but, in my heart of hearts, I believe this gives us the powerful chance for deeper discernment through group prayer and observation. If our disagreement results in personal attacks (as it does on tv and in social media), then our churches will be worse off. Instead, if we allow the gospel to speak to us through debate, then we grow together as disciples. Maybe we'll find common ground on particular issues through our collective study, reflection, and worship, or maybe we will agree to disagree and vote our consciences accordingly. We will know, however, that our deepest connection is as children of God who yearn to follow Christ faithfully.