

This piece was written by Pastor Scott to engage in conversation after hearing feedback to his letter to the congregation of Oct 4 and sermon shared in worship on Oct 7, 2018.

Oct 14, 2018

Dear Congregation of First Baptist,

I have received feedback to both my sermon of Oct 7 titled "Let The Light Shine In" (available on the church website) and the letter to the congregation of Oct 4 (see the back page of this letter). The feedback has ranged from a hearty "thank you" from some to a concern from others who feel that I may have been talking too much about politics. As many of you know, I am always interested in feedback. This letter is an effort to continue the conversation, so if anything here stirs you, please, let's talk!

I know that for some of you, the mere mention of politics in a worship service feels like a "no-no" because we are supposed to be talking about "spiritual" things, and not "worldly" things. Maybe you associate talking about politics in church with the separation of church and state, or perhaps it is awkward because you have not heard things like this in worship in the past. Maybe for you there are other reasons that you were left uncomfortable.

I'd like to take this opportunity to clarify what the "separation of church and state" meant historically. This will be a context to better understand what I was saying last Sunday and in the letter.

I think it is very important to be clear about these things, and understand where we stand as the Church. Making this even more important is the recent conversation about eliminating the Johnson Amendment from the US tax code. This amendment was adopted in 1954 and set some boundaries for non-profit organizations, including churches. This Amendment prohibits non-profits from endorsing or opposing political candidates for office. Eliminating this Amendment would allow churches, synagogues, mosques, and other non-profit organizations to endorse specific political candidates. I feel strongly that this is unwise, because it would open the door to mix up the church with political agendas and further divide the community that God has called to be united. Instead, I think it is important to maintain a separation between church and state.

Here is a brief history of this "separation" concept. The first statement about the separation of church and state was made by none other than Roger Williams, the first American Baptist pastor who in 1644 wrote about a *"hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world."*

This idea runs deep in the DNA and identity of baptists and is a founding principle of this country. In both cases, it is all about freedom.

The popularization of the phrase "the separation of church and state" is most often attributed to Thomas Jefferson who echoed Roger Williams in a speech given on January 1, 1802 to the Danbury Baptist Association in Massachusetts, which was then published in the newspaper. Jefferson said,

"I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof', thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."

This was incorporated into the Constitution of the United States in Article Six. It states that “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”

This was very important because the settlers in North America remembered that in England the state and the church were the same entity. In order to hold public office you had to have a particular religious affiliation. The government controlled the church’s expression and often used it for political maneuvering. The church became filled with political power dynamics and societal manipulation. The wisdom of the framers of our Constitution was to limit the possibility for abuse of power by the government over the church or any other religious institution. They were also concerned about a single king who unilaterally ruled without accountability. So, they created the three-branches of government (executive, judicial, legislative) that would keep a delicate balance of power. In the same way, they freed the church from the political power structure of government, so that they might act as another balance point to the political system within society. They did the same thing with the independence of the press. The framers of our country, were very deliberate about including a system of checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power at many levels.

Through the generations, the “separation of church and state” has been interpreted in a variety of ways, which go beyond my ability here to address. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather not have the government telling us how we are to do ministry and determining our organizational structure, and neither would I want for us as the Church to hold the power to determine who is elected to public office. So, I agree that it is a very good thing for the church and government to maintain a separation of power.

I also want to take a look at the bible and Jesus’ ministry, because these are central for us as followers of Jesus. How are God’s people depicted in scripture related to government and politics? Was Jesus’ ministry only about a portion of life determined to be “spiritual” as distinct from the political world of his day? Or did he engage with people inside a socio-political framework addressing not only the personal relationship with God, but the political nature of life in society?

It doesn’t take long when we read the gospels to see that these four books along with other writings of the New Testament and the Old Testament don’t include only nominal reference to the politics of the day, but depict a faithful people routinely interacting with government and political structures. In fact, the stories we have in scripture are encased in and cannot be removed from the context of the socio-political environment of the day. They include the social and political decrees of Caesar, military actions, speeches with negotiation and conflict between government officials and Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, and many others. Scripture includes political events, issues of taxation, political policies, injustice at the hands of government, as well as significant critique of these political realities. It is very clear that the authors of the biblical writings considered the political world a reality that must be engaged by God’s people. So, if we are part of that community who follows Jesus, it would seem to be our responsibility to address the political realities of our day.

I don’t have space here to do a biblical study of the places where faith and politics intersect in scripture, but I will mention one. Jesus was repeatedly described in all four gospels as the “Son of God.” In Jesus’ day, this was a title used to deify Caesar, upholding his lofty position of authority over all of the people. When this title was given to Jesus, it was a very political statement and critique of the political system. The claim was that Jesus was the true leader and his authority superseded the most powerful governmental leaders.

My own theological understanding is important to mention here. Foundational for me is the idea that God is interested in all of our lives, not only certain areas. I believe that all things have a spiritual reality. We engage in certain rituals we might consider “sacred” (like

communion and baptism, and worship) in order to remind us that all of life is sacred. As a group of people who come together as a faith community under God's sovereignty, it is important to include in our shared space all the variety of things that impact our lives, all of the things that concern us, worry us, and cause us to celebrate or rejoice. We do this because all of life is sacred — yes, even the world of politics. So, I feel it is important in our life together, not to exclude certain aspects of life that have been in the past considered "secular."

When I address the world of politics in a sermon, in a letter, or in conversation among people in the church, it is because these things are impacting our lives already. We are thinking about them, talking about them, concerned about them, fretting over them. If we cannot hold the space of our fellowship together to make sense of these things and understand how our faith makes a difference, then we have blocked our own growth, and live as if God is limited.

Considering the letter I wrote to the congregation (on the next page), while referring to the political process of Supreme Court nomination, it was really about the trauma experienced by one human being, and because it was so public, many others were re-traumatized throughout the country, including some in our congregation. The letter was to acknowledge the pain, the wounds, the trauma, as well our role as the church to provide a space for healing. The fact is that the source of the wide-spread re-traumatization was that some people in Congress, and others outside it, wanted to use Dr. Ford for political leverage, while their political opponents desired to discredit her for their political advantage.

Like many biblical stories, my letter, as a secondary point, was a critique of our political system that so abuses people for political gain. This wasn't a statement about which political party was right or wrong, but about how the contentious system is brutal to our shared humanity, and working against our intention to be God's Church and work to establish God's kingdom on Earth.

Last week's sermon message, in summary, was that as followers of Jesus we are people of light in this world amid all variety of challenges. Often we have either been consumed by what is happening in politics (as have some in our congregation), or write it all off and completely detach from the political process (as some others in our congregation). Instead, we can understand a better place to stand as people of light who come from a foundation of faith, while understanding our allegiance first and foremost to our God. From that place, we can both have our priorities in line, and be resolved to make a difference as people of light in this place where God has planted us.

Putting this point in context, toward the end of the sermon I said that the next representatives who are elected to Congress will not be our savior, and whoever is elected as our next President will not be our messiah. We can not look to them for these purposes, because we serve our God who is the real hope of the world.

I did not, nor will I ever (even if the Johnson Amendment is eliminated) advocate in the church for a particular candidate for public office, but encourage people to be aware, educated, and to vote their conscience. This is how our country was formed and I believe that exercising our freedom to vote can actually work toward a better country and a better world. It is powerful!

If you have read this far, thank you. I hope that you will share with me your thoughts on these matters, whether you agree with me or not. I want to honor your feelings, thoughts and opinions and continue the conversation about things that really matter.

Onward and upward in grace and peace,

Pastor Scott
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October 4, 2018

Dear First Baptist Family,

I have been contemplating recently how the Church can address the issues that are coming up for many women, including some in our congregation, as a result of the current Supreme Court hearing process. Certainly there are many issues about political process, partisanship, truth and lies, and the like. All of these may require attention, however, today I am specifically concerned with the response of women in the fallout after the credible testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford regarding her story of alleged sexual assault by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh while they were in high school.

What is most troubling is the response Dr. Ford received after being courageous enough to testify publicly. She was treated by some in power with a lack of validation, minimizing, questioning, and even mocking by our President. One might argue that this happened because the whole thing was politicized. However, this is not a new response, but a typical one experienced by many women who speak about their experience of sexual and physical abuse. Hearing this message once again in a very public forum has worked to re-traumatize many women whose voices have been lost. It is no wonder most women don't report sexual assault crimes or press charges against their abusers! In fact, sadly the two main reasons cited for remaining silent is fear of retaliation and belief that the police will not do anything to help.

When women who have been abused do speak out and are not believed, or worse yet blamed for their abuse, the process of justice comes to a screeching halt. This is why many women who have been abused, suppress their voice, and chose to internalize their emotional pain and trauma, which then takes its toll on every aspect of their lives.

Here are some numbers from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. One in three women in the United States have experienced some form of sexual violence against them. 81% of these women report significant short or long-term impact of the abuse, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. 63% of rapes are not reported to the police. False reporting is low, between 2 and 10%. In addition, as reported by the National Sexual Assault Hotline, perpetrators of sexual violence are less likely to go to jail or prison than other criminals. Out of every 1000 rapes, only 310 are reported, 57 are arrested, and six are incarcerated.

So, what is our response as the Church? We remember that we serve a God who suffers along with us the injustice that is exacted from places of power. As one who was broken himself, Jesus stands with the vulnerable, the broken, the forgotten — and so do we, Jesus' community. We are reminded that it is through the crucifying experiences of life that resurrection happens. In this we hold hope. As far as action, we, as the Church, can hold a space of grace, healing, and love while standing with those who are vulnerable and experience brokenness. Right now, there are many hurting and we need to be available as people of faith to pray for them, and create space where they can be heard and where healing can happen.

If you or someone you love has experienced physical or sexual abuse, first of all my heart breaks for you. Secondly, I want to be a resource to help you get what you need and will stand with and for you.

Grace and peace be yours,
Pastor Scott
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