

The idolatry of ideology: Baptists, the turmoil of Brexit & the crisis of Leadership

Brexit. Like most of the country you may be fed up hearing the word, but whatever your feelings about it and however you voted, there is no doubt that the EU referendum has exposed deep divisions within our society, and to a lesser extent, within the church. So, even if you are fed up hearing the word, we need to talk about Brexit, or at least the crisis it has precipitated. As the recent events in Westminster have shown, the UK is not only facing the biggest political and social change for 100 years, it is doing so during one of the greatest crises of leadership in the history of our democracy.

There is a growing consensus that MP's on both sides of the House of Commons are putting the interests of their Party over the interests of the people, and that they are at best, incompetent and at worst, delusional and self-serving. The political mess has become a breeding ground for lies, fake news, and information warfare by foreign powers and profiteering by disaster capitalists. The situation has become so serious that many social commentators suggest that we are witnessing the death of our democracy.¹

Whilst some church leaders are very open about their political views others are more cautious about becoming involved in political issues as contentious as Brexit. Yet the gospel itself is fundamentally political in nature insofar as it works in and seeks to transform the *polis* one life at a time. Furthermore, the first Christians were not persecuted by the state for preaching a message of love and peace but for declaring that Jesus Christ was Lord and Caesar was not. As theologian Jonathan Leeman points out, "the church's most powerful political activity is being the church and proclaiming its unique message."² That unique message is that Jesus is King and that through the Church he is establishing his kingdom in the present world, and so our engagement with the public square should, whatever form it takes, in some way, declare the rule and reign of God.

How are we as a family of Baptist congregations to respond to this turmoil and engage with the divisions Brexit has exposed in our society the society in which our congregations live and work?

Remind our congregations of what unites the Church. As Bonhoeffer notes, "Christian community is not an ideal that we have to realise, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."³ The divisions caused by Brexit, the turmoil in Parliament, the crisis in national leadership must be understood to be at best secondary to the genuine unity that believers experience together in Christ. Our loyalty is not to Party or State or political ideology, it is to Christ and through him to one another.

A few years ago at a ministry event John Greenshields led us in a study of the 'one another's' of the New Testament, and it is a worthy study that offers us a roadmap to

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy>

² Leeman, Jonathan, 2016, Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 14

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, 2005, DBW Volume 5, Life Together / Prayer Book of the Bible, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 38

navigate the differing viewpoints we may encounter in our congregations. In the Church, no political perspective must be allowed to supersede the truth that we are bound to one another in Christ.

Remember and stay focused on the mission of the Church. The mission of the Church is to continue the mission of Jesus, to declare that in him the kingdom of God has come. NT Wright has said that Jesus' rule in the world is made manifest as we launch the initiatives "that radically challenge the accepted way of doing things: by Jubilee projects to remit ridiculous and unpayable debt. By housing trusts that provide accommodation for low-income families or homeless people, by local and sustainable agricultural projects that care for creation instead of destroying it in the hope of a quick profit. ...Jesus went about feeding the hungry, curing the sick and rescuing lost sheep; his Body is supposed to be doing the same. This is how his kingdom is at work."⁴ In Galatians 6v10 Paul commands disciples to 'do good to all people, especially fellow disciples, it is by that 'doing good' that the sovereignty of Jesus is put into effect in a pagan society like ours.

Refuse to be silent. Doing good to all people means being in the public square, it means speaking truth to power as a corrective within the political process, reminding the civic authorities of the just demands of God's rule and reign. In name of the God of justice we must demand justice for the poor, the oppressed and the immigrant. In the name of the one who is the living embodiment of truth we must demand integrity and truthfulness for our elected representatives. We must remind our leaders, respectfully but firmly, that one day they will answer to God for how they have governed and led the nation.

The public square is a battleground of the gods and we need to be clear about whose side we are on, we must be in no doubt that whilst we have to engage in the public square, there is no political solution for the problems in the world today. No politician or party has the answers for what is wrong in the world, remaining in or leaving the EU will not put right the wrongs in our society. Václav Havel the first President of the Czech Republic rightly said that the belief that we can save ourselves – that some political system or ideology can fix human problems – has only led to more darkness. The world will only be put right when God's Kingdom comes in all its fullness, but our task, in word and deed, is to declare that Jesus is King and that his kingdom has broken into human history, and to make his kingdom rule manifest in world around us by our own actions and by our involvement in society. As Stanley Hauerwas has said, "the church does not just have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic."⁵ In other words, our politics is neither left nor right; it is simply to be the Church in the world, and anything less than that is idolatry.

Useful resources

<http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/politics-and-elections/meetyourmp/>

<http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faith/#Act>

<http://www.scottishbaptist.com/news/prayer-for-brexit-turmoil/>

⁴ Wright, Tom, 2016, God in Public: How the Bible speaks truth to power today, London SPCK, 161

⁵ Hauerwas, Stanley, Peaceable Kingdom, 99f