Chapter 11

The Politics of Loving God and Loving My Neighbor

Tennessee's Democratic lieutenant governor and Speaker of the Senate leaned over my desk on the Senate floor and put his arm around me. He needed a favor from the Republican whom he had named chairman of one of the Senate's standing committees. In that moment, I was forced to determine what I really believed. My "crisis" arose out of the fact that, during his recently completed campaign, the lieutenant governor had promised two different people that he would appoint them to a commission. The problem was that only one position was open. So he had proposed a bill to expand the number of people on the commission. But the bill had failed in committee, the committee I chaired.

Now, near the close of the legislative session, the lieutenant governor wanted to have the bill presented to the committee one more time to see if he could get a different result. The problem was that the committee had closed for the year, subject to the call of the chairman. While, as chairman, I could call the committee back into session, the Senate rules prevented a bill that had not passed in committee from

being reconsidered unless a majority of the committee members signed a letter to the chairman asking that the bill be reheard. I had received no such letter, thus the lieutenant governor's visit to my desk.

What the lieutenant governor wanted me to do was to be a good team player and help him out. I wanted to be a good team player. The question was, "What team was I on?" There were several from which to choose:

- The "team" composed of those whom the lieutenant governor had made committee chairs: the "lieutenant governor's team;"

- The "team" composed of Republicans who might benefit from or at least enjoy seeing the Democratic lieutenant governor squirm and perhaps alienate one of his constituents and campaign supporters;

- The "team" composed of the members of my committee who looked to me for leadership; or

- The "team" called the "Senate" that had adopted rules by which the Senate was to operate.

I told him I appreciated having been named a committee chair, but it was my duty as chairman and part of my oath to follow the rules of order that had been established. Since I didn't have the requisite letter, I couldn't reopen the committee. His parting words were to remind me in a very firm way that he had put me where I was and I was not being loyal or a good team player.

The story illustrates the very nub of the issue related to the "politics" of loving God and loving our neighbor. As Christians we have to first determine on whose team we are. It will determine how we "play the game."

Over the years I've come to see the truth of what we find throughout Scripture: it is what we do as Christians rather than what we say that provides the real clue as to what we believe. What we do reveals on whose team we are, and we are either on God's team or we are not. And in my experience, it seems that nothing better reveals whose team we are on than what we really believe about who is in control: God or man. Saying God is in control is easy. Living out life on the basis of that premise is what is hard.

Based on my observations of others *and* myself in the context of politics over a number of years, I have come to believe that, as a practical matter, the answer more often than not is that many of us who profess to be Christians don't really believe God is in control. Whom we really believe to be in control in any

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particular situation is often indicated by the degree to which we are fearful, anxious and insecure or peaceful, calm and confident.

What we fear reveals who or what we value or reverence the most.[68] None of us fears the loss or destruction of what is not valuable to us. What we fear losing most is what we value most. As Christians, we either fear God most or we fear something or someone else. In those moments we find ourselves fearing something or someone else, that has become our god. When that "something" is our god, then there is no real help for us. That means we have no choice but to be responsible for ensuring our continued relationship to that thing. Since we are on our own, we wind up having to save our god.

In the rest of this chapter we will examine this issue of control from the perspective of the elected official, the minister and the Christian citizen.

Elected Official

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate what I mean relative to the elected official is by example. On more than one occasion in my last years in the Tennessee Senate I heard someone ask me prior to a vote how I thought the vote would look in a campaign mail piece. I admit that the thought crossed my mind at times. However, in that moment, the elected official must ask himself if he is trying to be "wise" and "prudent" or if he really believes that voters alone are in control of who holds political office as opposed to God?

On another occasion, I was walking back to my legislative office with a couple of my colleagues after being on the losing end of a vote in committee. I asked them if I was wrong about the principle I had advocated in committee because, by taking the position opposite mine, they seemed to disagree. The answer was something along the lines of "probably not but you just can't vote against" the special interest group that was supporting the bill. In that instance, by taking that position the elected official apparently believes it is an organization or the voters represented by that organization that is in control of who holds office, not God.[69]

In both of these instances, when it comes to who is in control, mighty King Nebuchadnezzar would have reminded us, as elected officials, that God ultimately decides who holds power and authority within the governmental process. As the psalmist said, "For exaltation [comes] neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. But God [is] the Judge: He puts down one, And exalts another. "[70]

I also remember a sponsor of a bill in the Tennessee House telling me several years ago that a committee hearing on a bill he was presenting had been stopped in order for the person who was then Speaker of the House to meet with the committee chairman, appointed by the Speaker. The purpose of the meeting? It was to let the committee chairman know that he would be removed as chairman before the

day was out if he supported a certain version of the bill. A version of the bill, watered down by amendment, was voted out of committee later that day.

In that situation, the thing the election official values most is his committee assignment. Since those assignments are made by the Speaker or chairman of that legislative body, then the elected official who most prizes his committee assignments will naturally worry about how the Speaker or chairman perceives his actions. This is the person who is really perceived to be in control. Thus, the elected official must keep that person happy.

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The desire to be "effective" also tends to reveal who an elected official believes to be in control and who is his god. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be effective, but often the hidden motivation is the elected official's reputation in the eyes of others. In that case, the elected official's god is his reputation.

Similar to the situation involving committee assignments, elected officials who want to be "effective" are often fearful of bucking the leadership. The fear is that leadership will intentionally frustrate the elected official's agenda as a means of "getting him back in line." Then the legislator, unable to get anything done, is more likely to be seen by his constituents as "ineffective." Here the subtle lie of the devil is that one's effectiveness depends on having the support of the leadership. However, whether one is effective or not, and more importantly, what the meaning of effectiveness is, must be viewed from the perspective of the team upon which that person is "playing" and who is in control on the team.

For example, a newly appointed chairman of a legislative committee, a fellow Christian, once declined to sponsor a potentially controversial bill that I had brought to him. In declining to sponsor the bill he said he was trying to figure out how best to help on issues like this. He was concerned that he couldn't "help" if he made himself ineffective. But it seemed to me (and I pray I was wrong) that what he was really concerned with was whether leadership would be upset with him if he sponsored the bill and whether that would make him ineffective (or perhaps the concern was whether it would cost him his chairmanship at some point).

Respecting those whom God has placed in leadership over a legislator is legitimate but it can become easy for a legislator to rationalize a desire to be effective and lose sight of the fact that, ultimately, God makes a legislator effective. "Apart from me," Jesus said, "you can do nothing."[71] Pleasing leadership does not always make a legislator effective in God's eyes and if he or she is not careful leadership becomes the "god" the legislator wants to please.[72]

It is as if there is a political way of doing things and a biblical way of doing things, and the biblical way does not apply to politics.

Unfortunately, upon hearing such examples, some may just shrug and say, "Well, that's just politics." But think for a moment about the assumption behind such a statement. The statement assumes that there is this thing called "politics," it operates by its own rules, and God is just not really relevant. It is as if there is a political way of doing things and a biblical way of doing things, and the biblical way does not apply to politics. Such thinking is the kind of unbiblical compartmentalization we discussed in Chapter 5.

There are also those who will say that politics is the art of the possible. What is usually meant is this: in politics, every member

of a certain elected body has the same right to vote as every other member and sometimes the members do come to loggerheads. At that point, it is often said an elected official does not so much what he wants as what is possible. Sometimes doing what is possible is the right thing. But sometimes doing nothing is the right thing! Knowing which circumstance is which is often a difficult question for the elected official.

For instance, in Tennessee, under our state constitution, we must pass a balanced budget. So, when it comes to the budget, Tennessee legislators cannot just agree to disagree. And unlike a business with a chief executive officer who can make the final call, one legislator cannot decide for all the others what budget needs to be passed. Compromise, in this case, can become a constitutional necessity.[73]

But there are tougher situations. Consider the not so hypothetical case of abortion. There are those who believe abortion is murder, period. For them abortion should not be allowed even in cases of rape and incest. But if there are currently no laws restricting abortion, is it wrong to support a compromise bill that would at least make all abortions illegal other than those for rape and incest or to save the life of the mother?

Some would say, "Of course. The proposed law would reduce abortions and move closer to the goal of banning abortion." That is true, but sometimes the decision is not so easy. There may be other factors at play. Let me share with you a real example of one of the "other factors" that can come into play and a principle that I think can be drawn from it.

In 2000, Tennessee's state Supreme Court "found" a fundamental right to abortion in the state's constitution and struck down as unconstitutional Tennessee's abortion-specific informed consent and waiting period laws.[74] For years a House subcommittee killed a proposed constitutional amendment that would reverse the court's

ruling and once again make the constitution silent on the issue, allowing abortion to be regulated to the extent permitted under the rulings of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The inability to get the legislature to put the amendment on the ballot on our first several attempts was not as simple as "we'll get 'em next year." In Tennessee, citizens can only vote on constitutional amendments during a gubernatorial election, which occurs once every four years. If the legislature can't get an amendment passed to go on the ballot for the upcoming gubernatorial election, then the whole process has to start over with a view toward getting the amendment on the ballot four years later!

The problem the legislature had in getting the amendment through the House was the committee that first had to approve the bill was made up of strongly pro-abortion representatives. The members of the committee were appointed by the strongly pro-abortion Speaker of the House. The Speaker of the House was selected by a majority of the majority party. And that majority was pro-abortion.

Thus, there were only two ways by which the full House would ever be able to vote on the proposed amendment. The first was to make a procedural motion on the House floor to bring the amendment out of the committee and directly to the floor. Unfortunately, this kind of motion had to be approved by two-thirds of the representatives who voted on the motion. Getting two-thirds of the vote seemed unlikely though I have learned that you never know how legislators will vote once they are forced to cast a vote. The other way was for the minority party to pick up five seats in the next election and hope the new majority party would elect a pro-life Speaker. Hopefully, a new pro-life Speaker would ensure that the key committee had a majority of pro-life members. However, waiting for and hoping for a favorable election result meant that the process would be delayed at least another four years.

However, one of the pro-life legislators in the minority party came up with an ingenious "plan" by which the amendment might get to the House floor. There was a risk though. Some members of the majority party targeted for defeat in the next election might have been able to protect themselves from being attacked on the abortion issue during the upcoming campaign. If those targeted legislators voted for the plan, but there were not enough votes to get the amendment to the floor, then those legislators could not be attacked for not being pro-life. They would have voted for the pro-life plan.

The night before the plan was to be offered and voted upon, I sat in the office of the representative who had devised the plan. We were going over anticipated procedural objections and developing responses. An influential member of his political party came in and requested that he consider not asking for a vote on his plan. The reason was, as just described, to avoid giving some members of the majority party "political cover." Politically speaking, the request was one we would expect, as it seemed reasonable enough.

The request seemed reasonable because the odds were that the plan would not get the necessary number of votes anyway. And if the targeted legislators could not be defeated in the next election because their vote for the plan took the abortion issue out of the upcoming campaign, then the existing majority party likely would remain in control. That meant the speakership would remain pro-abortion. That meant we'd fare no better in getting the amendment on the ballot in four years than we had over the current four years period. Under that scenario, all would be lost. The amendment would not get to the floor for a vote and control of the House would not change from pro-abortion to pro-life.

However, the representative and I concluded that the possibility that someday another party would take control of the House did not justify allowing babies to die for several more years if, by God's

grace, we could get the votes the next morning that were needed. We decided to do what we thought was the right thing on the immediate issue before us: vote on the representative's plan. It was the one issue that we could "control." We realized we could not "control" what happened in future elections, and so we decide to let that more distant issue take care of itself.

The sponsor went forward the next morning. The plan did not get enough votes and failed. And, as predicted by the person the night before, one of the primary targets in the upcoming election voted for the plan. He now had the political cover that was supposed to make him harder to beat. Without his defeat, *along with that of a few others*, a change in control of the House was not likely. All appeared lost at the time.

But a funny thing happened on election day. The targeted candidate lost anyway. So did a few of the majority party's other candidates, one of whom was chided multiple times during the campaign for voting for some of the procedural efforts designed to kill the plan. That candidate's defeat helped provide *the one vote margin* by which control of the House changed hands! The thing that wasn't going to happen if the plan failed happened anyway.

The lesson I learned was this: beware of compromising to a position that is "better than nothing" if the reason is to achieve a purely political end, such as setting up a political opponent or saving one's own skin politically. When that becomes the reason for compromise, then the goal of the legislation in question and the purpose of compromise is no longer to advance the substantive ethical good. Rather, the goal is to advance a purely political good. In that case, compromise means sacrificing the potential ethical good for a potential political good. For me at least, the underlying assumption for compromise in this situation is a false belief that I need to take political matters into

my own hands, and doing that means that I just can't quite trust God with the results.

This is not the same as supporting the greatest amount of progress toward some substantive, ethical good when not doing so would otherwise result in no substantive or ethical good or progress being made at all. More times than not, it would seem that the incremental approach is preferable to nothing. However, there are some who would protest this incremental approach.

Often the argument of those who oppose the incremental approach is that by achieving only a limited good *the political pressure* needed to reach the ultimate good is lost. That is a reasonable thought.[75] But I refer to my previous example. What might be in the future is up to God. And while there is nothing wrong *per se* with being politically smart, we need to be careful that our political thinking doesn't turn into manipulative thinking. Manipulative thinking is tantamount to saying that God needs our help and he doesn't.

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This treatise is all well and good as it relates to elected officials, but most people will never hold elected office. So for the rest of us, what does the "politics of loving God" mean? Let's look at it from the perspective of the minister and then church members.

Ministers

When I ran for office, I was often asked what qualified me for elected office since I was a political novice. My answer was simple: "Are you kidding? I understand politics. I've been a church deacon and choir director!" Everyone laughed because they knew exactly what I meant—I had grappled with trying to figure out how to do the right thing without making everybody in the church mad at me or losing

my job. And after all, isn't that what we think most politicians try to do—make as many people happy and as few unhappy as is possible so they can keep their jobs?

Let's not kid ourselves when we say we don't want politics in the church. Some forms of "politics" already are in the church. But when it comes to the politics of public policy, my experience tells me that many (though not all) ministers avoid it like the devil. For the minister, "the politics of loving God" will mean coming into conflict with "the politics of the church."

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What is hard about the politics of loving God, as has been described, is that it requires worrying less about the effect of bringing "politics" into the church and more about whether the members under the minister's charge know how to love God and their neighbor well by faithfully stewarding the political authority they have been given. Are pastors willing to encourage sound stewardship in the realm of politics and leave the results to God? If so, ministers must do more than urge their church members to vote. At the very least they must equip them with an understanding of the basic biblical principles by which they can evaluate a proposed public policy or a candidate for office and then encourage them to take appropriate action.

This is not easy. I realize that in doing this the minister can face personal concerns about continued "employment." It is natural that such a thought would enter a minister's mind, but it raises the question of who is in control. Is it God, or is it the person in the pew, or the board of deacons or elders? I fear that the real answer, based on the silence in so many churches on issues touching politics, is that the minister fears the person in the pew or the lay leaders more than God.[76]

Not too long ago I had a conversation with a minister that left me wondering if this question wasn't in the back of his mind. As we talked about the need to address political and cultural issues, he said he agreed with me, but he lamented the fact that his elders had bought the modern-day version of the separation of church and state. I tried to encourage him that, as their minister, he might want to consider taking time to teach them otherwise. This, of course, entailed risk[77] because the elders might not prove very teachable and in his denomination, the elders hold the power to recommend that his call as minster not be renewed.

While I am not a minister charged with leading a local congregation, I can appreciate the minister's situation. It is easy to rationalize not doing something that could be controversial in order to protect our personal (and financial) well-being as well as that of our family. It is not unlike the internal, spiritual examination that I had to undergo all the time as an elected official: Was it up to me to keep myself in office or was that God's problem? Even now, as the leader of an organization that depends upon financial contributions to pay the bills, I find it easy to wonder if donors will perceive something I do in such a way that they stop donating. But the question for all of us still remains: Is God really in control?

> **Are pastors willing to encourage sound stewardship in the realm of politics and leave the results to God?**

Interestingly, the preceding paragraph reflects the very subtlety of the problem. Re-read it with attention to the word "depend." I really want to believe all the time that I do not "depend" on donors to pay the bills, but on God. Thus, the rationalizations with which I have had to deal are not dissimilar from those of the minister. I cannot throw stones, but if you are a minister, I invite you to join me in the struggle to totally trust God.

Let us mutually encourage one another to be honest with others and ourselves about this before him.

Another question a minister might face, related to the first, is what will happen to the numerical size of the church if controversial subjects are raised. No minister likes to preside over a dwindling congregation. But numerical size is only a measure of numerical size. It is mostly relevant to the amount of space needed and the size of the budget. The real issue is this: does numerical growth depend on teaching that is easy on the listeners because it avoids controversial subjects[78] or does it depend on God? These questions point out whom we really depend upon, and the answer depends on whom we believe is really in control.

Another concern I have heard expressed is that touching on these controversial subjects will keep people from being saved. Illustrative of this concern is a conversation I once had with a minister in the Calvinist tradition. He is perhaps one of the most gracious men I have ever met, meek and gentle in both spirit and demeanor. As we discussed talking about the political and cultural issues of the day within the church, he told me that he didn't like to speak of those things, because he was concerned that it would turn someone away from hearing the gospel. Leaving aside the issue of whether the gospel embraces every area of life, including the political, and therefore should be taught, I told him what I thought I had heard him really say.

What I thought I had heard him say was that even though a Calvinist would say he believed in the irresistible grace of God, he really believed that he had the power by his words in the pulpit to prevent God from saving the elect. I tried to encourage him not to consider a person's church attendance, or lack thereof, as proof of the person's eternal state. I reminded him that the offending sermon might be the

very sermon that provides the spark the Holy Spirit uses in another place and at a different time to bring about the person's salvation.

As with the elected official, the issue really is who is in control. In this case, it is often a question of who is really in control of the welfare of the church and of the minister's finances. Is it God or is it the minister, the people in the pews or the church's leadership. A minister who is not fully convinced that it is God will find the politics of loving him hard.

The Christian Citizen

For the person in the pew, the "politics of loving God" means risking loss out in the world. While a minister faces the possibility of loss of support among the church's leaders and even loss of employment, there is a sense in which a layperson's situation is much harder. At least the minister is presumably standing for the truth among those who are ostensibly there because they want to hear the truth. The layperson in his neighborhood and at work is not usually in such a potentially friendly place.

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The threat of loss is very real for the layperson. Increasingly, the news is filled with reports of Christians losing their jobs or positions because they have essentially been "too Christian" in the marketplace. I have personally experienced that loss.[79] The threat of such loss makes being involved in politics increasingly risky. It makes the politics of loving God hard.

The fear of loss, economic or otherwise, can motivate us to do things that, when looked at honestly, raise a question about whom we really think is our provider. Not too long ago, I had a conversation

with a Christian friend whose spouse belonged to a certain organiza-
tion that espoused very liberal political positions. He asked why I
had supported legislation earlier that year that the organization had
opposed. He rightly perceived that a primary purpose of the legisla-
tion was to weaken the organization politically.

It was a fair question. My answer was that the organization had
great political influence and had repeatedly used it to support sexual
promiscuity, abortion, homosexual conduct[80] and other values that
undermined God's design for the family. He agreed with me about
those issues and their importance, but his response was that they
just felt like his wife needed to belong to the organization. She
needed to be a member and for it to stay strong in order to protect
her rights and income as a member of the profession represented by
the organization.

As I said earlier, I understand the struggle with worry and the
desire to keep one's job. But I told my friend that what I heard him
really saying was that employment security and financial provi-
sion depended on the strength of an organization that advanced
unrighteousness rather than on God. He had not thought of it that
way. Happily, I was able to remind him that years before, when
his wife had lost her job and was not a member of any organiza-
tion, she had received multiple job offers within days. She never
missed a paycheck. God had provided without the aid of any support
organization.

Here are two other potentially problematic situations: 1) supporting
policies that redistribute wealth by actively taking someone else's
money in order to subsidize one's industry or profession and 2)
supporting the more passive redistributive policy of giving one's
business or profession a tax or regulatory break that others don't
get. It is hard not to support policies by which one is benefitted
personally. After all, giving up or not getting those "advantages"

could negatively impact the financial health of one's industry or profession. But the question that must be asked is whether we really support such policies because we see them as our source of provision and security. We may be looking more to the government for provision and security than to God. And if we get honest with ourselves and consider such policies to be government-sanctioned theft, then it may be that our trust in God's provision is so small that we are willing to resort to stealing to secure our personal welfare.

Concluding Thoughts

The bottom line for all of us is a couple of haunting questions:

> Who do we believe is in control?

> Who is our provider and source of security?[81]

As politics by intimidation becomes increasingly frequent, Christians will have to decide how they will answer those questions. And as Christians in a world that is increasingly hostile to religiously informed values, you and I are going to have to become less concerned with the negative consequences that may flow from standing up for biblical values and for those candidates who support them and more concerned with the knowledge that God sees our obedience as a demonstration of our love for Him and for our neighbor.

But there is one other thing that we will all have to be careful not to use to rationalize our silence in addition to our desire to protect ourselves against the loss of jobs, money or relationships. I have already mentioned it as an issue a minister must address. It will be easy for all of us to want to rationalize staying quiet, because we think that making people mad at us will surely turn people off to Christianity. Maybe so, at least with respect to their understanding of what Americanized Christianity, in general, has become to

them with its media campaigns, flashy concert-style services, and self-help-don't-talk-about-sin programs with a God-flavored twist.[82]

But we all know that the early church didn't grow exponentially because of the techniques we now use to promote and present our services and programs. It grew mostly because of its witness—the witness of the early Christians' love for one another and their willingness to accept the suffering their Savior said would be theirs.

It will be easy for all of us to want to rationalize staying quiet, because we think that making people mad at us will surely turn people off to Christianity.

So that led me to think: *Is it not also possible today that our willingness to suffer scorn, ridicule and other types of loss might just cause some to ask, "Can I know this God whom you find to be of such supreme worth that you are willing to lose in this life whatever the majority calls valuable?"* That loss could point them to him and to the possibility of a vital relationship with him rather than to an organization with aesthetically pleasing buildings, entertaining services and programs to become a better person. It just might point people to a way to be free from the bondage of needing to have the approval of other people on everything from the labels on their jeans to the type of cars they drive and the size of houses they inhabit. But, after all, isn't that what Christians should be doing anyway: pointing people to the Truth so that they can experience the even greater eternal pleasure of knowing the God who made them?