Christians in a Two-Party Election

Leading up to the 2023 Alberta provincial election, United Church leaders, are writing a series on Jesus' Politics, current issues and our faithful response. This is seventh and final article in the series. Read more at ChinookWindsRegion.ca

By Rev. Joanne Anquist

We don't technically have a two-party system in Alberta, but we seem to be headed towards a two-party election come May 29th. Unfortunately, people's political alliances are becoming an identity marker of sorts – and when that happens, it is easy to compromise our faith positions to align with a political party.

In reflecting on our provincial election, I recalled a September 2018 New York Times' piece by Timothy Keller, founding minister of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City which is still appropriate in our collective lives. It was called "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They don't."

The first point Keller makes is that Christians cannot transcend politics – we cannot just "preach the gospel." If you are silent on the issues of the day, you are affirming the status quo. He gives the example of those that did not speak against slavery because it was "too political". He argues that in doing so they supported slavery. He says "To not be political is to be political."

And this is an important point – because as Christians, we're not supposed to hive off our faith from the rest of our lives. You shouldn't have a Christian Ideology, a workplace Ideology and a political ideology that conflict with each other. One of the most important tasks of every person who claims to follow the Way of Christ is to work out what that means for your life, not just your Sundays. We are all flawed, and there is no "right" answer, but nonetheless, our faith should inform our whole life.

That doesn't mean we'll all end up voting the same, Keller notes. Being a Christian or attending a particular church should not include espousing a political party or ideology -- which has been a difficult thing for the United Church. As Margaret Wente observed in 2018 writing in the Globe and Mail:

"As the United Church found common cause with auto workers, it became widely known as the NDP at prayer. Social justice was its gospel. Spiritual fulfilment would be achieved through boycotts and recycling. Instead of Youth for Christ, it has a group called Youth for Eco-Justice. Mardi Tindal, [who was then the moderator], undertook a spiritual outreach tour across Canada to urge "the healing of soul, community and creation" by reducing our carbon footprint. This raises the obvious question: If you really, really care about the environment, why not just join Greenpeace?"

You might think all these things are worthy; I certainly do. And as a church or an individual person of faith, I might think that supporting these issues should be part of my faith footprint. But I do think that to make them "doctrine", or to assume it is the only way, for example, to care for creation, is to abuse the notion of a church that is trying to work out how God would have us redeem the world.

Let me be clear, care for creation and reducing carbon footprints, pursuing climate justice are religious imperatives if we follow Jesus – but how that happens could be achieved in a number of ways.

Keller says, "Most political positions are not matters of biblical command but of practical wisdom." But there are some moral positions which should, for Christians, cross political lines. As Keller says, "Racism is a sin, violating the second of the two great commandments of Jesus, to 'love your neighbor. The biblical commands to lift up the poor and to defend the rights of the oppressed are moral imperatives for believers. For individual Christians to speak out against egregious violations of these moral requirements is not optional."

But he goes on to note that there are many ways to help the poor – government policy is one – private contributions is another. We can disagree on the tactic but not the imperative.

Keller notes that the temptation for Christians is to either withdraw and try to be apolitical or to assimilate with a particular party and adopt all their policies. Neither of these options is valid. Our path is not the easy way where you can just check boxes without discernment, or go with the flow to not make waves.

Some say the Gospel of Jesus will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. There are hard choices to make when you are a person of faith, but also bountiful love to be shared.

So as people of faith, when you're thinking about what vote you are going to cast come May 29, take a moment to consider your faith. How do your candidates and the political parties envision living together in peace? How will they fashion a world that aligns to the Kindom of God where everyone has a place at the table? How will they protect the environment so that all can participate in abundant life? Which of your options will promote a more loving community and society? What are their policies on poverty and supporting the disadvantaged? There is no political party or policy position that has the complete answer to these questions. But we shouldn't leave our faith at the door when we enter the ballot box.

This election season, knowing that in many of our congregations, we have members of all political stripes, focus your discussion on the Politics of Jesus -the imperatives to Love God and each other, and evaluate which political party will meet these commands in the most effective way. Prayerfully consider political policies and your vote. It is a precious gift.

PS. As I was writing these words, I learned that Tim Keller died last Friday, May 19, 2023, at age 72. His obituary is here. While I have great respect for Timothy Keller, at the same time he and I would strongly disagree on his founding of The Gospel Coalition — an organization that has promoted harmful ideas about gender (he was a complementarian) and LGBTQ+ issues. It is always difficult to honour human beings who had positive influences yet who also caused harm and suffering. I think we have to live abundant grace always, even while we speak truth to power and care for the ones who suffer and are marginalized.

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You are welcome to print and distribute copies of Rev. Joanne Anquist's article, *Christians in a Two-Party Election.*