

Is “Silence” Tacit Approval? Wrestling with the Church’s Role in the Public Square

Calls for the church to engage in politics are nothing new, but the record number of executive orders and controversies surrounding the current administration have heightened the pressure. Some in my own congregation even struggle with worship attendance because they are disturbed by our lack of direct engagement in political issues. With the IRS recently removing restrictions on tax-exempt institutions endorsing candidates, the expectation grows: “Why isn’t my church speaking out about...?”

I understand this impulse. Christians do—and rightly should—care deeply about the flourishing of their neighbors. Like many others, I hold serious concerns regarding the current administration, though I have likewise harbored grave concerns about prior ones. It is essential to recognize from the outset that calls for increased church engagement in public life emerge from both the political left and right. One side underscores the crisis of fatherlessness and urges the Church to defend the unborn, protect national borders, uphold the Second Amendment, and resist both gender ideology and excessive government spending. The other side calls upon the Church to advocate for immigrants (whether documented or undocumented), affirm LGBTQIA+ rights, support women’s reproductive autonomy, pursue climate action, expand social welfare programs, and preserve longstanding governmental assistance to the poor.

The question comes to a head like this: If the Church doesn’t speak out on political and public policy issues, is it not giving **tacit** approval to the policies being implemented? Many say, “yes” but I say, “no.” Here is why.

The most common argument for political engagement by the Church draws from the haunting example of Nazi Germany. It’s often said: “The Church didn’t stand up against Hitler, and we can’t make that same mistake. We must engage, speak out, and take a stand!” But this narrative is more complicated than it appears—and in many ways, it’s flawed. The tragic truth is that the Church in Nazi Germany was not silent—it was loud. Rather than remaining faithful to its mission of proclaiming the Gospel, most of the churches aligned themselves with the power of the state and became a cheerleader for the Third Reich. The failure of the Church in that moment wasn’t that it did too little politically—it was that it did too much. An equivalent today would be if one of our political parties came in and tried to force us to champion their positions and we acquiesced. However, this trespass is not happening and one with which I would never comply.

Nevertheless, let's get back to the original question. Does a congregation or church's silence regarding the actions of a political party or administration mean tacit approval? Actually, one could just as well draw the opposite conclusion. By not endorsing any administration's action, we are proclaiming loud and clear that there is another, higher authority.

Today, many churches and denominations openly align with one side or the other. I often hear impassioned arguments—complete with Scripture citations—coming from leaders on both the right and the left, each convinced they are defending Biblical truth. Without judging which side better represents biblical values, I want to ask an important question: *Is this truly how God calls the Church to act?* Is direct political involvement really at the heart of its mission? Some say “Yes,” but I say “No.” According to the Gospels and Epistles, Jesus' mission was not to establish a new political system, though both liberation theologians on the left and Christian nationalists on the right argue otherwise.

Was Jesus' mission to overturn power structures, expecting that removing the Romans or the chief priests would establish God's reign? No. His kingdom came through the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins and defeat of death through his life, death, and resurrection. The radical truth is that Jesus' work was for all people, yet his kingdom was “not of this world.” For Lutherans, the New Testament makes clear that God's kingdom came in the person and work of Jesus, and the Church proclaims that reality as the Gospel—the good news. This kingdom must always be distinguished from the temporal, political realm. Luther called the latter God's “left-hand kingdom,” while Christ's reign is the “right-hand kingdom.” The Church's mission is firmly rooted there—delivering Christ's gifts in Word and Sacrament, not entangling itself in secular politics.^f

So what about the left-hand kingdom? Does this mean the Church should withdraw from public life altogether? Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine has sometimes been misinterpreted that way, but his own life shows otherwise. In fact, before he died, the last task he was working on in Eisleben was an attempt to reconcile a dispute between the secular Counts of Mansfeld. ***However, the key question is this: when Luther engaged in civic affairs, was he acting as a pastor of the Church or as a citizen of his country?*** The two-kingdoms distinction makes the answer clear—he acted as a citizen, living out his vocation to love his neighbor.

This is how the Church influences the world—not through political power, but by shaping people who love their neighbor. That love moves Christians to act in their homes, workplaces, and civic responsibilities, striving to “love one's neighbor as oneself.” Each believer must wrestle with how to vote, serve, and advocate for the good of others, especially the “least of these.” Was the civil rights movement not energized in this way?

Was it the church advocating change or many citizens who were driven by their faith to confront the insidious evil of racism? Such engagement is never easy; it involves tension, struggle, tradeoffs, and hard choices. But this is precisely the point: the two-kingdoms doctrine affirms the Christian's call to engage in public life, while keeping the Church itself focused on its true mission—proclaiming the Gospel.

You might ask, “Why can't the Church do both—proclaim the Gospel and engage directly in politics and public policy?” I see at least three reasons why the Church should not attempt to mix the two. First, politics always wins. When churches become political, as many mainline Protestant denominations on the left and American Evangelical churches on the right have done, political agendas inevitably push the Gospel aside. I see this clearly in my own denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, where the driving passion is what it calls “social justice”—a struggle against all power differentials. Many argue that we can do both: preach the Gospel and pursue social justice as a church. Yet, at least in my denomination, I rarely see the same passion for true evangelism—proclaiming Christ's forgiveness and victory over death to sinners.

One example is how in my former seminary a homiletics professor made evangelism the focus of his sabbatical and came back and offered a class on evangelism for his seminary and 8 other seminaries in the immediate area. Only two students signed up while the class on social justice was full beyond capacity! A younger colleague once remarked that during his time at a Lutheran seminary, most of his classmates seemed more interested in becoming social workers or community organizers than pastors. On the other end of the spectrum, I see some churches waving MAGA signs. In both cases, politics and secular causes crowd out the Gospel. As Paul warned the Galatians, if you add anything to the Gospel, you destroy it. Doesn't that warning apply whether you put a liberal or conservative “law” at the center of the church's mission?

A second reason the church, *as a corporate body*, should not engage directly in politics is that it is inherently divisive. When the church takes sides on political issues, it tends to gather people who are socially and politically like-minded, rather than forming a community united in Christ. I certainly see this in my denomination whose social positions are often indistinguishable from the Democratic Party. Both the left and the right often equate Jesus with their particular vision, but this strikes me as presumptuous. Yes, Jesus did bring division—but division over what? Not over politics or public policy, but over the role of the law and the universal reach of the Gospel. I'm trying to think about a time when Jesus called for the overthrow of Caesar, but I can't think of one.

The final reason—and perhaps the most urgent one today—why the church must not attempt to do both is that it clouds its witness to the world. How many people hear the

word “Christian” today and immediately assume it means “Republican” or “Trump supporter”? While the media has certainly amplified this stereotype, the sad reality is that I know believers who avoid even calling themselves Christians because of the way some American Evangelicals have merged the faith with conservative politics. This unholy alliance doesn’t advance the Gospel—it drives people away from it.

This brings us to the heart of the matter: What was Jesus’ mission? Was he the Savior who, on the cross, bore the sin of the world and in his resurrection made us righteous and defeated death for all who receive this gift? Or was he a political activist intent on creating a new social order? Recall the disciples’ question before the ascension: “Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus’ answer was clear: Wait for the Holy Spirit, who will empower you to . . . preach! Jesus achieved for us forgiveness and victory over death, his church now hands over that gift to all. It is in the proclamation of what Jesus did for us that his kingdom comes.

Can the church act as a corporate community? Absolutely. But we must recognize there is an important “fine line” kind of difference between caring for the poor and entangling ourselves in government policy.

My own congregation provides a good example. We host a free weekly community meal, make quilts for those in need, support local educators, health professionals, and military families, partner with ministries like Lutheran Social Services that care for the hurting, and open our campus to community and support groups. This kind of engagement flows naturally from the Gospel. It embodies Christ’s love while still allowing us to remain a politically diverse community, united not by party or ideology, but by faith in Christ.

Could there be such an egregious evil that would justify crossing the fine line? Certainly. I am not saying a pastor or congregation can never engage with a political issue or public policy or that I, personally, as a pastor, could never do so. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined here, it would be a very rare and extreme situation.

In summary, by refraining from championing political causes—unlike many mainline denominations on the left or Evangelical churches on the right—we declare that there is a greater reality than the state and the temporal realm. We hold to the conviction of two kingdoms: the spiritual reign of Christ through His Church, and the temporal realm governed by civil authority. In the temporal realm, God works through law and through individuals who serve faithfully in their occupations with honesty and integrity. In the realm of Christ, however, God works directly through the Gospel—through preaching and the forgiveness of sins, which is the ministry entrusted to the Church.

Individual Christians are indeed called to be engaged and informed citizens, loving their neighbors and advocating for justice. But the Church as a gathered community has a distinct calling: to faithfully steward the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. Now more than ever, the Church must keep its focus here—on proclaiming Christ crucified and risen.

So, whether or not you agree with my perspective, I ask this: if your church or pastors do not take public stances on political and social issues, do not assume the silence signals agreement, disagreement, or a lack of concern. In this context, silence reflects a deeper commitment—a determination to keep the Church focused on its true mission: proclaiming the Gospel and giving people Jesus through Word and Sacrament. Choosing not to wade directly into politics is not avoidance; it is faithfulness. It is our way of keeping the main thing the main thing. Moreover, it signals that the greatest need we all share is to hear and embrace the promise of the Gospel.

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