

Monthly Mod Musings

By John A. Bolt, Moderator, Presbytery of West Virginia, 2026

There's been a lot of energy and imagination, some intelligence, but perhaps not so much love in the air in recent months as people of faith debate the church's role, if any, in that discussion. Much, maybe even most, of it is around the question of how "political" the church should be.

Political is deliberately in quotes because it depends on what is meant by political. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines the word as "of or relating to government, a government or the conduct of government; of, relating to, or concerned with the making as distinguished from the administration of governmental policy."

Contrast that with the definition of "partisan:" "feeling, showing, or deriving from strong and sometimes blind adherence to a particular party, faction, cause, or person."

And that's what the debate is really about because far too often we say political when what we really mean is partisan.

Should the church be political? Yes.

Should the church be partisan? No.

That's good to keep in mind as we approach Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, we will celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Immediately after Matthew recounts the entry, the very next verse says, "Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." (Matthew 21:12, NRSVue)

It's not the first time the church has been embroiled in the question of being political.

Were the prophets being political when they repeatedly reminded the Hebrew kings that they had led their nation astray and would suffer the consequences?

Was the church political when Jesus stood up to Pilate? Was the church partisan when the Pharisees took Jesus to Pilate, using the excuse that Jesus had said he was a king?

Were Paul and Peter being political when they challenged Rome and were killed because of it? Were Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church being political when they railed against National Socialism?

Was the church being political as ministers and members marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle?

Is it being political in reminding those in power of how we are to treat the “alien in our midst”?

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will be faced with this same question when the 227th General Assembly convenes this summer. Two items of business address the issue of Christian Nationalism, one comes from the Presbytery of San Jose, proposing a Book of Order change that would prohibit the denomination from aligning with any theology that seeks to privilege any faith over another, singling out Christian Nationalism.

The second comes from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy in response to a directive from the last GA and asks that the denomination “repudiate ideology and practices of white Christian nationalism in all its forms and affirm the PC(USA) historical support for disestablishment of religion.”

These are important questions as many, including high-ranking government officials, call for a particular kind of “Christian” government of our nation. Let us pray that intelligence and love join the conversation in full force.

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