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NAVIGATING THROUGH POLITICS: LESSONS FROM ADVENTIST HISTORY

By Justin Kim

There are some topics that are taboo during the holidays. Bringing up religion, salaries, and weight gain results in loud pauses of awkwardness. But the conversation that eclipses these is politics. It strains family relationships, leads to loud verbal exchanges, and causes indigestion even before the meal is finished. Stanford scholar Shanto Iyengar opines that politics overrides other social categories of self-identification, such as gender, race, religion, language, and ethnicity, because these are assigned at birth, whereas the former can be decided by yourself.¹ Because of the heat associated with politics, we often relegate it to the inner sanctum of privacy to avoid further pain.

However, with the constant news cycle and the pressure of public dialogue, there are always waves of political conversations that try to force a position out of us. Whether it be presidential elections, the latest tragedy in race relations, or a pending Supreme Court decision, we shrink from the weariness of politics, yet are tempted to engage

its passion. Social media, with all its promise to promote dialogue and discussion, has only added to and accelerated this condition.

As Bible-believing Seventh-day Adventists, how are we to navigate through the rapids of politics? At what point do we participate or disengage? Which values of political parties do we subscribe to, and which should we avoid? How are we to vote as contributors to democracy but also as those looking forward to the Second Advent?

With these questions, perhaps you are already questioning the political position of the author? This suspicion already evidences our sensitive and politicized milieu. The goal of this article is not to provide a resolution to a political question or persuade a political presupposition of a party. Rather it is an attempt from a politically fatigued soul to provide principles on navigating faith amid politics. The author has no legal background, does not enjoy political discussions, but merely hopes to offer practical approaches. For the purposes of this article, we look at Scripture, the writings of Ellen White, as well as quotes from a few historical Adventist leaders as sources for our principles.

Romans 13:1-7 states, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. . . . For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed,

revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed” (ESV).²

First, it is clear that Christians are to obey governments because they have authorization by God to exercise power. Second, Christians are not called to anarchy or other forms of chaos or lawlessness. Third, we are to pay taxes, obey laws, and respect the offices of power. Notably, we must also couple this passage with the admonition of Revelation 13, where Bible-believing and Christ-following believers will be called to be civilly disobedient to government powers when they exceed the authority given to them by God.

Though given by God, the question arises of what the role of government power is. Based on where the old houses of French government sat, right wing/side denotes the stance for limited power of government whereas the left wing/side denotes the stance for increased power. Though political discussions should focus on how much power government has, they have been relegated to *who* has power, whether it be the rich/poor, White/Black, educated/uneducated, or whatever social delineation you choose. Rather than *who*, we must turn our attention to understanding the role of power in government. While our knee-jerk instinct may be to hold back power, in some instances power must be exercised for justice, mercy, and the good.

This is where the separation of church and state comes in. Church and state represent the two great powers. If one were to take the state and boil it in a pot until the water evaporated and it became a syrup, and continued to reduce it until it became a crystal, what would be at its central core? Essentially the state is the power of force. This force has been

given to the state by the people through a social contract, giving it the ability to “force” citizens to pay financial penalties, pay taxes, remove them from society as the incarcerated, and even in some jurisdictions to die. The state uses force.

If one were to do the same experiment with the church, what would be the prime component at its core? Any congregation would offer a myriad of answers (often all correct), but essentially the church encapsulates the power of conversion. In the Christian’s church context, the Holy Spirit works through the preached Word of God made possible by the ministry of Christ and the individual heart is supernaturally changed—converted.

At the core of separation of church and state is a healthy relationship between force and conversion (as epitomized in Matthew 22:21). In other words, the state ensures that the church (and all religions) to do “its thing.” In the United States, through the establishment clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution, religious liberty is founded where religious organizations are free to preach, teach, and grow (and, in the case of Christianity, promote the spiritual regenerative conversion of the heart). That’s the role the state has—it allows religion, and all religions, to be free.

Most liberal democracies do not have a state church. But imagine if the state’s force was used to promote the church’s conversion: a tax for those who are late to church; those sleeping during the sermon would be imprisoned; missing tithe remittances would result in 401k deductions. Wouldn’t that be ridiculous? However, there are indeed advocates for this relationship of church and state. After all, it would surely increase religious attendance, religious donations, and

religious participation! History attests to the further abuses of the mishmash of church and state, but we also see its modern manifestations in some Latin countries and Roman Catholicism, various European countries and Protestantism, the Middle East and Islam, and Southern Asia and Buddhism.

As Christians, though we believe in the power and authority of the state to protect, we also believe in the inherent power of the Spirit to convert through the power of the Word. If the state enforces what the church should be preaching, this combination ironically demonstrates the weakness of the church and its message. Governments must stay neutral regarding religious truth; they must protect the ability of religions to promote, communicate, and preach their truth.

As we shift to early Adventism, many took to the separation of church and state to the other extreme: apoliticism. Politics was discouraged; many did not discuss issues that were relevant to the second coming of Christ. Moreover, some early Adventists thought if they voted for a particular party or body, they were held culpable for all its actions and abuses. “Under these circumstances, if I cast my vote at all, it will . . . tell for, or against the making of the image. If I vote in favor of the formation of the image, I shall aid in creating an abomination which will persecute the saints of God. . . . On the other hand, if I vote against this work, I shall vote against the fulfillment of the prophecy. . . . Therefore, I cannot vote at all.”³

Later Adventism transitioned its political attitude. Many rallied against the legalization of alcohol in the temperance movement. Ellen White herself wrote, “Men of

intemperance have been in the office today in a flattering manner expressing their approbation of the course of the Sabbathkeepers not voting and expressed hopes that they will stick to their course and like the Quakers, not cast their vote. Satan and his evil angels are busy at this time, and he has workers upon the earth. May Satan be disappointed is my prayer.”⁴ “‘Shall we vote for prohibition?’ she asked. ‘Yes, to a man, everywhere,’ she replied, ‘and perhaps I shall shock some of you if I say, If necessary, vote on the Sabbath day for prohibition if you cannot at any other time.’”⁵

Adventists were so involved in politics that then-General Conference president George Butler admonished against too much involvement.⁶ Yet simultaneously he advocated for the temperance movement: “We hope every Seventh-day Adventist voter in the state [of Iowa] will vote for this law, and induce all others to do so whom he can influence by honorable means.”⁷ Clearly a shift had occurred from apoliticism to full political engagement.

The temperance movement came to an apex when the Eighteenth Amendment, for prohibition, was proposed in 1917. Two years later the amendment was ratified, and one year after that, the amendment was implemented. Because of its political success, temperance organizations were unfunded. By 1933 the Twenty-first Amendment had repealed the Eighteenth, and it was too late to recapture any political momentum.

Ellen White did not get to see what happened to her temperance advocacy, as she died in 1915. But it is interesting to see her support of politics, especially in light of service. “Many a lad of today, growing up as did Daniel in his Judean

home, studying God's Word and His works, and learning the lessons of faithful service, will yet stand in legislative assemblies, in halls of justice, or in royal courts, as a witness for the King of kings."⁸ "Are you ambitious for education that you may have a name and position in the world? Have you thoughts that you dare not express, that you may one day . . . sit in deliberative and legislative councils, and help to enact laws for the nation? There is nothing wrong in these aspirations."⁹ "But the life of John was not spent in idleness. . . . He was ever an interested observer of what was passing in the world. From his quiet retreat he watched the unfolding of events."¹⁰ Clearly she saw the value of the political office, its influence, and was not a proponent of apoliticism.

Those are the large principles that we are working with. Adventists acknowledge and respect government. Adventists should separate church and state. Adventists should get involved in society. But on the individual level, how are we to interact with the world of politics? As a good Seventh-day Adventist, seven practical principles are proposed.

- 1. Vote for Virtue.** "How can Christian men and women tolerate this evil? . . . There is a cause for the moral paralysis upon society. Our laws sustain an evil which is sapping their very foundations. Many deplore the wrongs which they know exist, but consider themselves free from all responsibility in the matter. This cannot be. Every individual exerts an influence in society. In our favored land, every voter has some voice in determining what laws shall control the nation. Should not that influence and that vote be cast on the side of temperance and

virtue?”¹¹ Adventists should look at the motive of which they vote. Is it for virtue and for that which is good? Or are there ulterior motives: retirement security, financial prosperity, identity justice, or anything else based on self? Hebrews 4:12 says the Word discerns the inner heart, and we are to take each decision to the Lord where we can honestly say that we are voting for virtue.

2. **Voting Is Private and Personal.** “Keep your voting to yourself. Do not feel it your duty to urge everyone to do as you do.”¹² In an age of social media the pressure exists to push on our social circles the ideas we hold dear, or to react to what others have posted. Rather than publicize our political preferences and urge them to conform, voting should remain private and personal.

3. **Avoid Parties.** “We cannot with safety vote for political parties; for we do not know whom we are voting for. We cannot with safety take part in any political schemes.... It is a mistake for you to link your interests with any political party, to cast your vote with them or for them.”¹³ “God employs the strongest figures to show that there should be no union between worldly parties and those who are seeking the righteousness of Christ.”¹⁴ Partyism is a tool in which strong social reinforcement overrides rationale. There is an inherent ingroup bias with parties, in that no matter how reasonable and logical “the other side” is, there is deep antagonism. Partyism appeals to identities that people have of themselves, which outrank any other sociological category. It causes unnecessary disagreements

that tear the middle apart to gain votes. Political parties lead to groupthink, addiction to political pundits, and ultimately disrupt relationships, contradicting the message of Christ.

4. **Avoid Political Questions.** “The Lord would have His people bury political questions. . . . Let political questions alone... The tithe should not be used to pay any one for speechifying on political questions. Every teacher, minister, or leader in our ranks who is stirred with a desire to ventilate his opinions on political questions should be converted by a belief in the truth, or give up his work. . . . God calls upon the teachers in our schools not to become interested in the study of political questions.”¹⁵ These political questions are the politicized issues of the day; they are different from moral stances. As tithe has been set apart for the salary of those in the gospel ministry, those teachers, pastors, and leaders using their platforms for political issues are violating the holiness of tithe. We should let alone the political issues of the day, but rather focus on the underlying moral principles.

5. **Vote as From an Adventist Framework.** “The ‘image to the beast’ represents that form of apostate Protestantism which will be developed when the Protestant churches shall seek the aid of the civil power for the enforcement of their dogmas.”¹⁶ “How the Roman church can clear herself from the charge of idolatry we cannot see. . . . And this is the religion which Protestants are beginning to look upon with so much favor, and which will eventually be

united with Protestantism. This union will not, however, be effected by a change in Catholicism; for Rome never changes. She claims infallibility. It is Protestantism that will change. The adoption of liberal ideas on its part will bring it where it can clasp the hand of Catholicism.”¹⁷ Although we may share the values of a particular party or denomination, we must be careful of the prophetic warnings given to us. We are not to vote from Democratic, Republican, liberal, conservative, Protestant, Catholic, or even American frameworks, but from an Adventist one. Though we occupy between king of the north and the king of the south, we serve the king of the universe!

- 6. Get Involved as an Adventist.** “The people of God will recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment and will teach obedience to it as a sacred duty within its legitimate sphere. . . . The banner of truth and religious liberty . . . has in this last conflict been committed to us. . . . And we can appreciate these truths only as we search them out by personal study.”¹⁸ “These schools [of the prophets] were intended . . . to promote the prosperity of the nation by furnishing it with men qualified to act in the fear of God as leaders and counselors. To this end, Samuel gathered companies of young men who were pious, intelligent, and studious. . . . These schools proved to be one of the means most effective in promoting that righteousness which ‘exalteth a nation.’ In no small degree they aided in laying the foundation of that marvelous prosperity which distinguished the reigns of David and Solomon.”¹⁹

Adventists should continue training Waldensian students to sit in legislature, educating our own Daniels and Josephs. Let us not trust others, but involve our own.

7. **Rely on Sacred Faith.** “We are not to come down from our position of ever remaining a people distinct and peculiar from the world. Our vocation is high, holy, and elevated. Our faith, if appreciated, will keep all true believers from political strife. . . . The fires of the last day will consume many souls who might have been saved if the church had but comprehended her sacred responsibilities.”²⁰ As ambassadors of heaven, may we use our involvement in a sacred way.

Though individual Adventists are called to sacred political involvement, the church is not a political organization. Adventist leader and editor F. M. Wilcox best summed it up here: “The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not seek to dictate to its members as to how they shall vote or whether or not they should vote at all. It is left for each one to act on his own judgment in the fear of God. We have been told by the servant of the Lord that we should not link up with political parties, that we should not agitate political questions in our schools or institutions. On the other hand, we have been instructed by the same authority that when certain moral issues, such as prohibition, are involved, the ‘advocates of temperance fail to do their whole duty unless they exert their influence by precept and example--by voice and pen and vote--in favor of total abstinence.’ This instruction is not mandatory, it is still left for each one to determine for himself what he shall do.

“While an individual member of the church has a right, if he so likes, to cast his vote, the church as such should hold itself entirely aloof from politics. It is one thing for the individual members of the church to vote, and another thing for these same individuals in their church capacities to endeavor to influence political measures.”²¹

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- 1 Politics often overrides gender, race, religion, language, and ethnicity (see Milenko Martinovich, “Americans’ Partisan Identities Are Stronger than Race and Ethnicity, Stanford Scholar Finds,” Stanford News Service, Aug. 31, 2017).
 - 2 Scripture quotations credited to ESV are from the *Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
 - 3 Roswell F. Cottrell, in *Review and Herald*, Oct. 30, 1856.
 - 4 Ellen G. White, *Temperance* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1949), p. 256.
 - 5 Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Lonely Years, 1876-1891* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1984), vol. 3, p. 160.
 - 6 Jared Miller, “Adventists, Prohibition, and Political Involvement,” *Liberty*, November/December 2011.
 - 7 George Butler, in *Review and Herald*, Apr. 11, 1882.
 - 8 Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903), p. 262.
 - 9 Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1923), p. 82.
 - 10 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 8, pp. 221, 222.
 - 11 Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1915), p. 387.
 - 12 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958, 1980), book 2, p. 337.
 - 13 E. G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pp. 475-478.
 - 14 E. G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 392.
 - 15 E. G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pp. 475-484.
 - 16 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 445.
 - 17 Ellen G. White, in *Review and Herald*, June 1, 1886.
 - 18 E. G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 6, p. 402.
 - 19 E. G. White, *Education*, pp. 47, 48.
 - 20 Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases (Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990)*, vol. 9, p. 12.
 - 21 F. M. Wilcox, in *Review and Herald*, Sept. 13, 1928.



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