



5 Steps to Navigating the Political Climate

Craig Rees

1. **Paint the picture.**

Our focus must not be on what is going wrong in our nation but on how we bring God's glory to our country. The evangelical church is a powerful voting bloc, and political parties with present our parishioners alternate visions for America. Against that backdrop, we must present everyone God's grand vision – one that will complement and conflict with these alternate visions at different junctures. We're currently championing that grand vision in a series called *It's Complicated: From a Mess to a Masterpiece*. Our text is Ephesians 2:10-5:1. Ephesians is probably a circular letter the Apostle Paul wrote to churches in Asia Minor struggling to live as the new hybrid people, a blended family of Jew and Gentile. Ethnic, racial, and cultural differences caused dissension. Paul wanted these churches to embrace the messiness that is the local church, cognizant of God's desire to create a masterpiece out of her (5:27). Through the series, we pray that we would understand the purpose of the church, embrace the complicated reality of making one people out of very different people, see the necessity to deepen our experience of Christ and acknowledge the ways God needs to put us right as we embrace our role in God's vision to put the world right. Strategically, we desire to position our church as a compassionately conservative congregation committed to a respectfully resistant approach to the socio-political challenges we face. Tactically, the series helps people understand the challenging circumstances the church has always faced and always will. I have learned that it is not enough to show how political visions are incomplete and wrong. I must paint a grand vision for the church that God calls every Christian to embrace. We must evaluate everything against God's grand vision. Every pastor's challenge in this politically tumultuous climate is visionary, first and foremost. What are we calling our people to? If that is not God's grand vision, we fail them and the Christ we serve.

2. **Get in front.**

One of the key lessons I have learned about navigating the political climate is to take time to address the themes I need to. Believing that vision leaks, we are trying to drip our vision and strategy over a more extended period. The later I leave it, the more emotionally volatile congregational reactions to the message will get. When I leave it too late, I cover too many themes in too few sermons, increasing the tension. We decided to work 16 months out of the 2024 election. Beginning with a sermon series in August 2023, including two other major weekend series and a 5-week midweek issues-based training (April and May), we address critical topics our way.

3. **Choose your starting point.**

Dr. John Dickson has excellent thoughts on the art of persuasion in post-Christian America, especially one as polarized as this. The term post-Christian suggests that Christianity's place is no longer sustained by law and culture. So, says Dickson, it is persuasion or bust. But how do we persuade? Dickson asks how we should view America about spiritual matters. "Do you view America as a backsliding Christian and admonish them? Would you do the same in another



nation?" Navigating through political polarization requires us to pick our path: are we moving out from Athens or Jerusalem? To navigate the political season, every pastor must answer where they believe they are - Athens or Jerusalem - and proceed from there. How a pastor persuades will depend on where they think America is. If it is Athens, the approach will be very different than if I consider it Jerusalem. I believe we are in Athens, and books like *The Great Dechurching* suggest this approach will bear the best missiological results. If pastors are unaware of that book, I suggest they grab a copy and ponder it with their leadership team.

4. **Share your Strategy.**

Upon reviewing my strategy through the 2016 and 2020 elections and COVID, I realized I could have helped our church had I been clearer with our strategy. By working further out, being convinced that I pursue God's grand vision from Athens, I must be transparent regarding our strategy for 2024. Here is how I have done this. In a series called *Babylon* (August 2023), I shared two messages that unveiled our strategic approach. In my first message (week 2 of the series), I shared four possible approaches to life in Babylon (my Athens): Violence, Withdrawal, Assimilation, and (what I think typified Daniel's approach) Respectful Resistance. I highlighted the contrast between the religious leaders' approach Jeremiah countered (violence, withdrawal because it would all be over soon) and Daniel's response (assimilate, but different from how Joseph and Esther did). Respectful Resistance is the strategy Daniel pursued, and we'd do well to follow. Respectful Resistance requires three skills: Adaptation, Resistance, and Connection (ARC). The second message (week 3 of the series) looked at Daniel's tactics. In that message, I shared how a church responds to governmental policies they don't like (this message was the one I had my brain hemorrhage in - which is why many called it a spiritual attack). What makes the practice of Resistance so challenging can be summarized in two words: STRATEGY and SPEED. We must be more transparent about the strategy and avoid going too quickly too soon. Here, Joel DeYoung's book, *Bonhoeffer on Resistance*, comes in. DeYoung highlights six types of Resistance from Bonhoeffer's writings.

- a) Individual and humanitarian Resistance to state injustice.
- b) The church's church service to victims of injustice.
- c) The church's indirect political word.
- d) The church's direct political word. (Phase 1: (1) – (4) 1932-1935)
- e) Resistance through discipleship. (Phase 2: 1935-1939)
- f) Resistance through the responsible action of the individual. (Phase 3: 1939-1945)

The pressure I've faced as a pastor is people pressing for (4) as a path to (6). We overlook that Bonhoeffer's revolt against Hitler took 13 years and went through various stages. In contrast, some parishioners get to Resistance through responsible action – revolt – in thirteen minutes and get angry when the pastor doesn't do the same. We live in a world where things move fast.

DeYoung highlights two extremes to avoid:

1. Church becomes a civil protest movement: non-violent Resistance, where the church's role is confused with a 501c3 and shows it through civil protest.
2. A resistance movement too quickly. Bonhoeffer's posture against the Nazi regime was the end of a long resistance process, the final stop through a six-pronged resistance strategy. Open Resistance was not his starting point, and we are far from that. A vital ingredient in the pastoral response to political polarization is the willingness to move through the gears



intentionally, which requires more clarity about our strategy. Once we've defined it, we can share it.

5. Allay the fears.

We can allay fears on a Scriptural level by reminding people that God is in control of our country. We can double down on that claim by drawing on the work of Samuel P. Huntington. In the 1980s, Huntington wrote *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. The book claimed that every 60-70 years, America goes through 'creedal passion.' Creedal passion happens when a new generation becomes concerned with the gap between the ideals they think the nation has and the institutions created to carry them out. Previously unconcerned with what was happening, people became passionate, agitated, and politicized. Huntington claims that the passion demonstrated in these seasons is no different from the typical passion we see at other times. Huntington says that Americans exercised creedal passion four times: in the 1770s, in the 1830s, in the 1900s, and the 1960s. American history, he says, is littered with 60–70-year cycles, and Huntington predicted that this would happen again around 2020.

Huntington identified 14 characteristics of 'creedal passion' cycles. Five characteristics address the results, with nine addressing the general mood. I focus here on the nine. Creedal passion periods, he says, reveal:

- a) **DISCONTENT**: "Discontent was widespread; authority, hierarchy, specialization, and expertise were widely questioned or rejected."
- b) **IDEOLOGICAL PASSION**: "Political ideas were taken seriously and played an important role in the controversies of the time."
- c) **TRADITIONAL VALUES**: "Traditional American values of liberty, individualism, equality, popular control of government, and the openness of government were stressed in public discussion."
- d) **INDIGNATION**: "Moral indignation ... was widespread."
- e) **AGITATION**: "Politics was characterized by agitation, excitement, commotion, even upheaval — far beyond the usual routine of interest-group conflict."
- f) **HOSTILITY**: "Hostility toward power was intense."
- g) **EXPOSURE**: "Exposure or muckraking ... was a central feature of politics."
- h) **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**: "Movements flourished devoted to specific reforms or 'causes.'"
- i) **NEW MEDIA FORMS**: "New media forms appeared, significantly increasing the influence of the media in politics."

In 1985, Huntington (p. 231-232) predicted that a period of 'creedal passion' 'was likely around the second and third decades of the 21st Century. Huntington predicted that we'd enter a turbulent period where expert opinion would be rejected, ideological convictions would be divisive, traditional values would be questioned, and new media forms would fuel the divide. Sadly, even evangelical Christians have fallen foul of this. Rather than pointing believers to God's wonders, we've added fuel to the divisive fires. We're in such a cycle right now, so we've seen numerous articles commenting on the similarities between 1968 and 2020. 1968 was bloodier than 2020, but it's similar because history in America runs in 60-70-year cycles. If that disorients us, it should not because Christian history is linear. There's a straight line running to the Second Coming of Jesus. Yes, our nation goes around in circles, and we are navigating a



cycle that has and will continue to bring much disappointment. But I stand with Huntington (p. 262), who says, "Critics say that America is a lie because its reality falls so far short of its ideals. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope."

"That hope for us lies in the power of God. According to Psalm 78, the reference point for the nation's ability to keep going is the wonderful things God did. Huntington (p. 229) acknowledges this. "Each of the four creedal passion periods was preceded by a religious "great awakening."

"Now, Huntington claims that the religious passion of the 1950s wasn't as strong as in the 1750s. He questions how strong it will be moving forward. But something is clear: not only was there a great awakening before or during creedal passion periods, but there were also wonders after them. Here is the hope pastors can latch on to. We can use our history to point to the wonders of God that Ephesians 5:27 says is Jesus presenting to Himself a perfected church of very different people.