

Seeking an Understanding

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Read This First

*O*n my bookshelf are two works, written by two friends, with two entirely different viewpoints: *For Calvinism*¹ by Michael S. Horton and *Against Calvinism* by Roger E. Olson. As you may have guessed, one author is for Calvinism—simply put, God is in control of everything—and the other author is against Calvinism (named after Protestant reformer John Calvin), promoting the idea that people still have free will to make choices (known as Arminianism, named after theologian Jacobus Arminius).²

These two theological positions have had bitter confrontations for hundreds of years. Yet these two learned men maintain a friendship and a respectful dialogue despite their differences. Each one is gracious enough not to label the other a heretic and to include them in the family of God. Neither believes that the other is right, and they don't embrace a relativism that says all beliefs are true. They do, however, believe the other is sincere and doing their best to discover the truth, so they stay in dialogue.

In the Preface of *Against Calvinism*, Olson gives two principles before engaging his friend's theology. The first is: "Before saying 'I disagree' be sure you can say 'I understand.'" The second is: "Always represent the other viewpoint as its best adherents represent it."³ These two principles also inform the approach this book takes.

This book was inspired by two challenges I faced as a pastor a few years ago. One, certain political and cultural issues were occupying the minds of my parishioners. Two, the way people discussed these issues often led to caustic and ill-informed dialogue with each other, usually online. I watched good people talk past

1 Horton, M.S. (2011). *For Calvinism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

2 This is a major reduction and simplification of these two rich theological traditions.

3 Olson, R.E. (2011). *Against Calvinism: rescuing God's reputation from radical reformed theology*. Grand Rapids: MI, Zondervan, 13.

each other, caricaturing each other's position and making statements that made me cringe. How could I address it beyond just telling people to stop?

At the time, I was in the middle of my Ph.D. program, studying various communication theories and social issues. I thought about tackling some issues directly, applying the research I was doing, but was prevented by the reality that everyone starts from different knowledge bases and is affected by different life experiences. To jump into a direct conversation about any social or political issues would be divisive since I would inevitably use language and concepts foreign to some in my congregation, and familiar to others.

Additionally, the various issues were so emotionally loaded and nuanced for people that trying to tackle them in a single sermon would increase the chance of saying something offensive or nuanced in order to get people out of the church service by lunchtime. How could I find a solution to the communicative anarchy plaguing my faith community? The solution I eventually decided upon was not a solution at all.

I have entitled this work *Seeking an Understanding*, not *Seeking a Solution*, for that reason. I certainly hope and pray for solutions to our divisions; however, before we can work on healthy solutions, we need to be able to communicate with each other in healthy ways and seek to understand the issues. Seeking an understanding first will hopefully lead to a greater capacity for us to talk to each other, and even debate with each other, in less toxic ways.

Over a period of a few weeks I designed a sermons series that would take a running start at all the issues. We would begin with a discussion of power rooted in what my faith tradition calls “The Great Controversy”—the clash between good and evil, God and the Devil, beginning with the war in heaven (Revelation 12:7–10). From our discussions of power, we would carefully move through some of the major ideas and theories informing how people think and talk about issues, using the issues as examples and illustrations, instead of problems to be solved within the sermon series.

I have changed the order of subjects in this book somewhat, though power is still one of the first items discussed. I wrestled choosing an order for the chapters, as some certainly seem to flow together more logically than others. However, we all come to these areas with emotionally charged baggage. That is why I have put them in what I hope is a helpful emotional order. As we build our understanding of certain elements, some subjects will be easier to hear.

This book brings together interpersonal and intercultural communication principles, tempered with what I hope is a practical pastoral approach. It does not seek to break new ground in terms of research, but synthesizes current research into

an accessible entry point for those who want to have better conversations. A book like this tackles subjects that require their own books, so this is certainly not the final word—but maybe a first word for those feeling overwhelmed and confused by the angry chaos communicated around them.

While I am not without opinion on the issues used as illustrations in this book, I have tried to do my best to treat them under Olson’s guiding principles of representing them in the way their best adherents do. Any issues brought up in this book are complex and you will not find them irresponsibly reduced as merely conservative or liberal plots and propagandas, which is a common tactic used by pundits and ill-informed social media posters looking for attention. I have tried to stay within the big picture as countless examples of each element discussed in this book show up online every hour.

Even now, I write amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the global riots and unrest revolving around the murder of George Floyd by a police officer. These issues, and others, are vast and complex, and to adequately address them all would mean never finishing this book. Again, this work is a starting place, not a finishing place. I only offer the highlights in the hopes serious readers will invest in the texts mentioned in the footnotes and suggested reading at the end of the book.

At the end of each chapter I have a few reflections and some exercises which I encourage you to try. I included these not only because we all need practice at good communication, but sometimes there were discussion points or illustrations I couldn’t fit into the chapter itself, though it related to the subject. If possible, work through the exercises with other people.

This book is gently faith-based. This means that while my faith as a Seventh-day Adventist informs my work, and there are biblical references and illustrations within this text, I have tried to make the language and references as accessible and relevant as possible—even if you don’t identify with any faith whatsoever. The principles highlighted are for everyone. I hope you will find this book helpful in your pursuit of healthier conversations and greater understanding.

1 “Don’t Be Political”

Years ago, in a sermon on the power of confession, I shared a story about someone from the LGTBQ community. The story did not argue for a theological position, but simply shared a perspective from someone who struggled with their orientation and how being able to share that struggle with others helped them find a path forward. Afterwards I received an email from a “concerned” member wanting a meeting.

When I met with the concerned member, they shared with me that any inclusion of LGTBQ stories, or ones featuring racial tensions, or nearly anything from the news was being “political.” Instead of sharing these types of stories I needed to “focus on the Gospel” and “avoid politics” because, after all, what do pastors know of such things? *Interesting*, I thought. *What could a pastor, ministering to a diverse group of people and personalities and opinions, in a volunteer-based organization rich with 150 years of tradition, possibly know about politics?*

Now, I’ll be the first to admit that pastors can say irritating and insensitive things. In 2019, during a pastors meeting, someone asked well-known speaker John MacArthur what he thought of Beth Moore. MacArthur does not believe in women holding spiritual leadership positions, but instead of giving a theological reflection, he simply responded, “Go home.” The male ministerial audience all laughed, but those on the outside who witnessed the callous dismissal (which also bore notes of a woman’s place being in the home and/or kitchen) were not impressed, including major evangelical figures like Max Lucado. Even those who hold similar positions called out MacArthur for his Christless comment. Pastors are certainly capable of making ignorant and divisive statements.⁴

However, many armchair theologians have the self-awareness of a Crock-Pot and what they cook up is crazier than a soup sandwich. What’s fascinating about the

4 Lee, M. (2019, October 23). *John MacArthur is no stranger to controversy*. Christianity Today. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/october-web-only/john-macarthur-beth-moore-controversy.html>

“don’t-be-politicals” is they are the same people who spend most of their natural life sharing inflammatory politics any way they can in the most public way possible. This leads me to believe that the issue isn’t politics.

Rather, it’s the fact that someone had the audacity to disturb the pristine waters of someone’s political presuppositions with the cannonball of another perspective that might make them have to change—or worse, think. This phenomenon, known as cognitive dissonance⁵, is extremely uncomfortable, so they seek to silence the voice that makes them feel that way. “Don’t be political” really means “Don’t speak.”

To be fair, some of us use “politics” to mean anything “unnecessarily divisive,” and we should avoid things that unnecessarily divide us. However, when it becomes a catchall phrase to avoid real issues, we are failing our mission. The Apostle Paul writes to an extremely divided church in Corinth stating: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation”* (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). By running away from discussions on sexuality, racism, abuse, power, and money, the church starts to look like that meme of a smiling cartoon dog saying, “Everything is fine,” while the office around him is on fire (see Picture 1.1).



Picture 1.1 Credit: Gunshow illustrated by K.C. Green and published January 2013

One of the first tasks in this book on seeking to understand each other, which often involves cultural and political issues and inspires others to use the phrase “don’t

5 Cognitive Dissonance was developed by Leon Festinger in the 1950s to explore how people process new and conflicting information.

be political,” is to disabuse you of the notion that the way of Jesus and speaking to “political issues” don’t go hand in hand. We’ll begin with Psalm 137.

SING US A SONG

“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs and our tormentors, mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” (Psalm 137:1–4). The background to this Psalm (which we never sing in church or usually make a memory verse for children) has to do with the Babylonian’s successful siege on Jerusalem. The Israelites are being marched in captivity to Babylon, when some of the military leaders say, “Hey, I know, why don’t you all sing us a song while we walk. You know, something from your homeland, the one we just invaded and destroyed. Sing us a little something.” There’s no iPod or mobile devices, no ear buds, except the buds walking next to you who can sing in your ear. The Israelites are not going to sing, at least not the song the Babylonians want to hear.

Growing up, a favorite song my church school teachers would sing on Sabbath was *Shall We Go for a Walk Today?* It’s a jaunty tune that is full of gazing at the wonder of creation and all its gifts as one takes a walk outside. Perhaps this is the type of song the arrogant Babylonian soldiers wanted to hear? Instead, the Israelites went a different route. I have chosen to share the song they actually composed about this situation from *The Message* paraphrase to give a better sense of how offensive this song would have been in the ears of their captors.

Imagine listening to this ditty about your homeland in the background of a long journey: *“Oh, how could we ever sing God’s song in this wasteland? If I ever forget you, Jerusalem, let my fingers wither and fall off like leaves. Let my tongue swell and turn black if I fail to remember you, If I fail, O dear Jerusalem, to honor you as my greatest. God, remember those Edomites, and remember the ruin of Jerusalem, That day they yelled out, ‘Wreck it, smash it to bits!’ And you, Babylonians—ravagers! A reward to whoever gets back at you for all you’ve done to us; Yes, a reward to the one who grabs your babies and smashes their heads on the rocks!”*

Rude.

I love to imagine the faces of their captors when this disturbing little ditty escapes the lips of their captives. “Hey! That’s not what we asked for! Keep it down back there!” It would be like being in the car with absolutely nothing good on the radio, as if every channel conspired to annoy you with the worst possible programming. Imagine wandering through the Mesopotamian countryside listening to acapella curses about your future. God’s people could have sung a spiritual song, full of promises and platitudes. They also could have remained silent altogether,

which in itself would have made a statement; but instead they wrote an “imprecatory” Psalm, a cursing Psalm, directed at a political power seeking to strip their spiritual identity. This brings us to a critical reality we often forget when we believe that our church services are free from politics—worship is ALWAYS political.

THOSE WHO TOLERATE

For those who enjoy reading apocalyptic literature, both Daniel and Revelation link worship directly with politics. For example, in Daniel (a book about a prophet living in the Babylonian captivity we just looked at) chapter seven, Daniel’s vision of kingdoms represented by beasts and horns is interpreted and revealed to point toward political challenges faced by God’s people. Scripture says one of the world powers “shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law” (7:25). A global power that speaks against God, setting itself up as the ultimate law-giver, and exhausting “the saints” (God’s people) is both a worship and a political issue.

Heading over to Revelation, Jesus confronts various churches with political realities rooted in the surrounding cultures which affect their worship practices. In Revelation 2:18–21, Thyatira is called out for tolerating “that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (v. 20). The author uses the image of Jezebel, an ancient queen known for hunting down God’s prophets—those who spoke the truth (see 1 Kings 18–19). The use of the image of such a character is political and its placement—right smack in the middle of a book in the Bible that gives Christians their prophetic mission—is a political statement.

To understand why this specific political figure was used, it’s important to note Thyatira’s social reality. The church in Thyatira was not a cultural or political hub; however, historians note that in order to do business in the Roman Empire, you had to belong to a trade guild, and Thyatira enforced this requirement. Part of being in a guild was attending guild festivals—office parties on steroids which included immoral temple rituals as part of state worship. Refusing to party meant expulsion from the guilds and economic sanctions. And Jesus says that some people in that faith community tolerated it. In other words, they didn’t speak out because that might cause economic hardship. Political power and privilege are often tied to the economy, forcing those who lack political power and privilege to tolerate abuses in order to make a living. Perhaps people didn’t speak out because it might be “political”—but worshipping God is always a political act.

SPIRITUAL OR POLITICAL?

When God asks Moses to approach Pharaoh on God's behalf and ask him to release the Israelite slaves that are currently building the Egyptian empire, is it spiritual or political? When Queen Esther is asked to approach the king to speak on behalf of her people because a genocidal maniac named Haman wants to eliminate them, is it spiritual or political? When King Nebuchadnezzar orders everyone to bow down to his golden image when his orchestra starts playing, and three Hebrew men stand while everyone kneels, and then tell the king to his face that they will never bow, is it spiritual or political? When Jesus is asked whether or not He pays taxes, and He holds up a coin with Caesar's face on it and says "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," implying that, contrary to popular belief, Caesar and God are not the same person, is it spiritual or political?

Of course, Christians like to point out the need to separate church and state, and rightly so; however, Christians seem to confuse separation of church and state with separation of our prophetic voice from the public space. We have separated faith and works by allowing theological fearmongers to demonize concepts such as "politics," "culture," and "social justice," as though it were only a government concern. We have given our voice to politicians, given our will to act to government agencies, and what we are left with is a group of people with a form of godliness, but no power to say or do anything.

THE POLITICS OF SPEECH

In *Politics*, the great philosopher Aristotle observes, "Now that man is more of a political animal than bees or other gregarious animals is evident, man is the only animal [Nature] has endowed with speech."⁶ Human beings share the same ability to vocalize joy and pain as wild animals. But as soon as you speak, as soon as you produce speech, as soon as you name things, you produce politics, and justice, and morality, which is why the Bible spends a great deal of time talking about the words we use and the ability of the tongue to scorch the earth. Some people use their speech to build political and physical power that seeks to dominate and destroy the spiritual life of other people and it is in those moments, as symbolic stewards, managers of the gift of communication God gave us in Eden, we need to speak.

A TIME TO SPEAK

Now, to be sure, there is a time not to speak. When two parties are having a private disagreement about something you don't understand, just pray; don't say. But there are many times when we are called upon to say something. "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth,

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*.

judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8-9). This principle was driven home for me several years ago when someone in the community surrounding our church was the target of racism.

During a pastors meeting, Erin Jones, a well-known lecturer and committed Christian, gave a presentation on racism, which made some people uncomfortable, but we left blessed, having had some real talk about real issues that affect people in our churches. Some of the real talk she gave us included a story from Parkland, a 12-minute drive from our church in Puyallup, Washington, about a Black man named John Gore who opened Notes Coffee Co. next to Pacific Lutheran University. He had experienced harassment and burglary and eventually made a public post on Facebook, stating:

In March the place was broken into, in April a random guy walked into the shop ranting craziness and called me the “n” word. In June I hosted a music event and some folks with MAGA hats and confederate flag t-shirts gathered in the store. Today my partner was told she should smile while standing in the dark so she could be seen. After reopening I have seen a decline in business, I’m not really sure what to do next.⁷

On December 12, the local News Tribune covered the story, and some in our community rallied to support this local business and make a statement that racism and prejudice have no place in our community, regardless of who you are and with which political party you affiliate.

My staff at the time decided to speak out too. So, instead of our usual staff meeting, we had a field trip to Notes Coffee Co. We each made an order and spent over an hour talking with Gore, thanking him for being in our community, and staying strong in the face of such a toxic climate. We took a picture together and shared it with the congregation, who responded in turn by visiting the Gores’ business for breakfast and lunch. Later he shared the picture we took with Erin Jones, who shared it on her large social media platform, stating:

I may not be a member of #SDA church, but I’m proud 2 b associated w/ them. 2day, after a full day of training on #racialreconciliation yesterday, pastors decided 2 take action + visit friends of mine whose coffee shop was targeted because of their race. #NotesCoffee #ActionSpeaks.⁸

Not only did our church successfully call out racism, a prophetic political action sanctioned by Scripture, but we also built a positive bridge between us and those of other faiths. Negative press about the church is common, so to have someone publicly

7 <https://www.facebook.com/emergingvoice/posts/10156666194673186>

8 From the Twitter account of Erin Jones, January 9, 2019, @erinjonesin2016

say they are proud to be associated with your congregation is a huge victory, and an opportunity for further dialogue.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have examined the oft-repeated comment “don’t be political” and seen that the statement itself is a political tactic to silence others. One of the most powerful quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr. that my friend Erin Jones shared with us at pastors meetings says: “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” We need to speak. Jesus puts it this way: “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:37). I believe this includes the words of peace, reconciliation, and solidarity we *don’t* choose to speak. Visiting that local coffee shop owner was one of the easiest opportunities we had to say something positive for Jesus. Don’t let others bully you by saying you’re being “political” and don’t let fearmongers terrify you into a Gospel without good works. Speak and act in the name of Jesus.

REFLECTIONS...

1. What do you see as a healthy definition of “politics”?
2. Many people only see politics through the lenses of conservative or liberal American politics. Is this helpful or harmful to discussions of concepts like justice, economics, history, etc.?
3. The classic aphorism, “So heavenly minded, no earthly good,” is used to describe believers who use the promise of Jesus’ final redemption of the world as an excuse not to take action. People will even demonize ideas such as “social justice” by viewing it through a conservative political lens, instead of seeing it as merely a description of social action demonstrated in Scripture. How can we bridge the gap between the hope of a future “New Earth” and not criticizing those who also find it meaningful and imperative to relieve human suffering?