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Politics and the Pulpit — Some Helpful Words

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Richard W. Garnett, a professor of law at the University of Notre Dame, offers some wise counsel on the issue of the pulpit and politics, noting that all true preaching has some political dimension to it. This is simply inevitable, given the fact that Christian preaching deals with the most important (even ultimate) issues of life.

Here are two key paragraphs from his article, published in Monday's edition of *USA Today*:

For starters, and with all due respect to Jefferson, the First Amendment does not constrain — in fact, it protects — “political” preaching and faith-filled activism. Yes, our Constitution preserves a healthy separation between the institutions of religion and government. This wise arrangement protects individual freedom and civil society by preventing the state from directing, co-opting or controlling the church. It imposes no limits, though, on conversations among religious believers — whether on Sunday morning, around the water cooler, or at the dinner table — about the implications of their faith for the controversies of the day. Our First Amendment protects religious freedom, individual conscience and church independence from government interference; it requires neither a faith-free public square nor politics-free sermons.

Even if the Constitution does not presume to tell ministers to stick to parables, is it bad citizenship, or just plain bad manners, for ministers to confuse our “public” role as citizens and voters with our supposedly “private” religious lives and beliefs? No. Religious faith makes claims, for better or worse, that push the believer inexorably toward charitable and conscientious engagement in “public life.” To the extent that religion purports to provide insight into human nature and relations, it necessarily speaks to politics. We best respect each other through honest dialogue by making arguments that reflect our beliefs, not by censoring ourselves or insisting that religious believers translate their commitments into focus-group jargon or cost-benefit analysis.

Now, the central thrust of a genuinely Christian pulpit is the Gospel itself. Nevertheless, the Gospel is also political, if for no other reason than that the Gospel declares that Jesus Christ (and not Caesar, or anyone else) is Lord.

In making his case, Professor Garnett gets to the heart of the matter. Christian beliefs do, inevitably, “push the believer inexorably toward charitable and conscientious engagement in ‘public life.’” There is much to debate concerning how these issues are best defined and understood, but Christianity is a public proclamation with public consequences.

Garnett's analysis is most helpful, especially as he deals with misperceptions of the constitutional boundaries.

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