Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” Matthew 4:8-11

Have you ever wondered what went through Jesus’ mind as he stood there on that high mountain next to the Devil, looking out over the kingdoms of the world in all their glory?

I’m sure that Jesus was fully aware, even then, of the excruciating suffering and humiliation that he would soon have to face in his quest to provide humanity the way to be reconciled to God. And here was Satan, whom Jesus would later refer to as “the ruler of this world,” making a final desperate offer: all the kingdoms of the earth if Jesus would just fall down and worship him. The Devil was putting it all on the line. He would withdraw from all that was under his control in exchange for a moment of triumph over the Son of God. With the removal of Satan’s influence, the world’s inhabitants would undoubtedly have seen a new era of peace and prosperity, with Jesus in power. Since Jesus was going to suffer humiliation anyway, maybe this represented a way he could have gained the whole world while avoiding the physical cruelty of death on a cross? So why didn’t he take the deal?

Well, first of all, Jesus made clear in his rebuke of Satan that God alone is to be worshipped. In fact, the very idea of the Son of God worshipping at the feet of this rebellious and fallen angel is an absurdity and an affront to the spiritual order of the cosmos. The Creator of the universe would never bow before his own creation, regardless of what was offered in exchange. Besides, Christ’s victory over Satan had already been assured through the divine plan of God. No deal with the Devil was needed. Jesus’ arrival heralded the coming Kingdom of God, and our Lord’s subsequent death and resurrection established that Kingdom forever. For all intents and purposes, Satan was done.

Furthermore, it was never Christ’s intention to establish his Kingdom by co-opting the political power structures of this world, no matter how appealing a solution that may have seemed from an earth-bound perspective. In other words, when it comes to human power, the Kingdom of God was never meant to be a top-down endeavor. Satan’s offer of “all this authority” (Luke 4:6) would simply not have coincided with what Jesus came to accomplish or how he planned to accomplish it.

Ironically, by using the political process to create for their children a society that reflects their religious values, these Christians run the risk of spiritually alienating the very children they had hoped would inherit the society they built.
Jesus made this point clear again and again in his life and teaching. He taught an ‘upside-down kingdom,’ where “the least shall be first,” where his followers were called to be servants and to enter the Kingdom “as little children.” He taught the predominance of love. He blessed the meek, the merciful, the poor, and the peacemakers. He confronted the abuse of religious power, and he highlighted the dangers of wealth. A week before Passover this country-men welcomed him into Jerusalem as a political Messiah who they hoped would restore the glory of Israel, yet just a few days later, Jesus laid down his life as one despised and rejected, accused of blasphemy and abandoned by those he loved. At any point he could have mustered both earthly and heavenly armies, but instead he told Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36).

Jesus and his apostles rejected earthly power as a means of establishing this Kingdom from ‘another place.’ They also taught that the power of God would be made manifest in human weakness. Christ’s Kingdom was not dependent on human power structures, because it is a spiritual Kingdom born in the souls of each of his followers, one that germinates from the inside out, not in response to human governance, but in response to the Spirit’s urging. Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is one of invitation, not coercion, with citizenship freely offered to all who repent and accept his reign.

Historically, our understanding as Anabaptists has been framed by using Jesus as our model and the New Testament church as our guide, especially as we related to the political structures around us. Jesus and his apostles did not use the coercive power of the Roman or Jewish authority structures to advance the cause of the Gospel, and we Anabaptists have tried to follow their lead. In fact, many religious historians point to the Anabaptist movement as one of the first groups to articulate the now widely accepted concept of ‘separation of church and state.’ While most Anabaptists accept the God-ordained role of the secular government to punish evil and maintain order in a fallen world, we have traditionally understood this coercive function to be outside of the call of Christian discipleship. As a result, Anabaptists have suffered under the state’s wrath in addition to enjoying its protection, in much the same way as the early church.

Despite this historic understanding, there is reason to believe that the commitment to maintaining a clear distance between the work of the Kingdom and the power of the state is waning within our churches. Perhaps more than ever, Mennonites on the right and left are increasingly seeing political engagement as an expression of their faith. Behind this perspective is often the decidedly un-Anabaptist (and un-New Testament) idea that we are called to use political processes to win the spiritual battle, either to restore America as a ‘Christian Nation,’ or to usher in a prophetic vision of peace and justice.

One of the principal reasons for this shift among Mennonites is the fact that we are no longer as insulated from the dominant culture as we once were. This brings our people into greater contact with all types of media, including the teaching ministries of churches and organizations who promote political involvement as a sacred responsibility. And even though these ministries teach a very different understanding of a Christian’s duty relative to the state, their message resonates within our community because we share many of the same biblical values.

In an election year like this one, the sense of urgency has increased. And in response, many of these Christian media voices have augmented both the volume and frequency of their appeals, spiritualizing the political process and pleading for Christian involvement in “the battle.” Here are just a few examples:

If we are to win the battle for America we must – as Gideon – overcome our fears and unbelief, trust in God to be with us, and go to battle at the ballot box as valiant warriors! – David Crowe, founder and president of Restore America, in a fall 2010 open letter to pastors.

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A quote from C.S. Lewis’s novel, *The Screwtape Letters*

This excerpt from Patricia Klein’s editorial review of *The Screwtape Letters* at Amazon.com provides the framework for understanding the quote from Lewis’s work that follows.

Who among us has never wondered if there might not really be a tempter sitting on our shoulders or dogging our steps? C.S. Lewis dispels all doubts. In *The Screwtape Letters*, one of his bestselling works, we are made privy to the instructional correspondence between a senior demon, Screwtape, and his wannabe diabolical nephew Wormwood. As mentor, Screwtape coaches Wormwood in the finer points, tempting his “patient” away from God.

Each letter is a masterpiece of reverse theology, giving the reader an inside look at the thinking and means of temptation. Tempters, according to Lewis, have two motives: the first is fear of punishment, the second a hunger to consume or dominate other beings. On the other hand, the goal of the Creator is to woo and bring others to a relationship with him. As Lewis explains, “the Enemy will probably protect him from the usual consequences of belonging to a sect. Your best plan, in that case, would be to attempt a sudden, confused, emotional crisis from which he might emerge as an uneasy convert to Patriotism. Such things can often be managed. But if he is the man I take him to be, try Pacifism.”

Regardless of motives, the Christianization of political power is fraught with a number of inherent dangers that we, as evangelical Anabaptists, should consider:

*The danger of getting distracted from our primary calling* – Jesus has commissioned us to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything he commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). We are to validate this message with lives full of love for God and others (Matthew 22:36-40), and we are to seek the Kingdom of God above all else (Matthew 6:33).

Yet, when the lines between faith and politics become blurred, we begin to invest increasing amounts of time, energy, resources and emotion in seeking political solutions for what are often spiritual problems. Our God-given assets are co-opted...
by civic agendas, and the advance of the Gospel is short-changed. Evangelical author Michael Spencer concurred in his article “The Coming Evangelical Collapse”:

The evangelical investment in moral, social, and political issues has depleted our resources and exposed our weaknesses. Being against gay marriage and being rhetorically pro-life will not make up for the fact that massive majorities of evangelicals can’t articulate the Gospel with any coherence. We fell for the trap of believing in a cause more than a faith. (From The Christian Science Monitor, March 10, 2009)

[See sidebar for C.S. Lewis’s thoughts on Christians and political activism.]

So how do we as evangelical Anabaptists live out our calling to be salt and light in a lost and violent world? In light of the dangers, must we avoid politics altogether?

Christ Before Pilate ~ Nicolaes Maes

The danger of becoming a house divided – Jesus observed that a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand (Matthew 12:25). So did Abraham Lincoln, for that matter. Jesus, of course, was speaking of the spiritual realms, and Lincoln of earthly societies, but both recognized the fact that division works against the strength of a movement, and both appealed for allegiance. Jesus even asserted that ‘unity of spirit’ would be one of the most convincing proofs to a skeptical world of his presence in the lives of his followers (John 17:21).

Yet as we Mennonites have placed more stock in politics, those new loyalties have divided us as they have divided the rest of society. You see, as political activists know, the way to motivate people to involvement is to moralize every issue and vilify the opposition – not just their policies, but their intelligence, their integrity, and even their faith. And when we in the household of faith have bought into these partisan character assaults, we have essentially ignored Scripture’s injunction to “be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3-2).

The danger of investing in earthly power – As American Anabaptists, originally transplanted to the soil of this country on the promise of freedom of religious expression, we have much to be thankful for. The religious liberty and stability we have enjoyed for over 300 years has allowed us to worship openly, and has prospered us as a people. However, this prosperity also presents us with spiritual challenges; chief among them is the temptation to become overly attached to our possessions and, by extension, to the systems that help us retain them. Jesus told us that where our treasure is, there also will our heart be (Matthew 6:21). While Christian political involvement is usually framed nobly as a defense of godly values, we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge the less noble lifestyle-preserving motives that lie beneath the surface. Spiritually, this seems a far cry from Jesus’ teaching that we are not to worry about tomorrow, but instead prioritize the work of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6).

Additionally, when we are enticed to put our trust in the temporal power of governments and political parties, we should recognize that in the end Jesus will reign supreme. “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (I Corinthians 15:24-25). And while Scripture recognizes the legitimacy of governmental power for punishing evil and rewarding good (Romans 13), it also points to the potential for earthly powers to “make war
Thoughts on Earthly Power

The following quotes are taken from Malcolm Muggeridge’s book, The End of Christendom. Muggeridge was an English journalist and author.

We look back on history and what do we see? Empires rising and falling, revolutions and counter-revolutions, wealth accumulating and wealth dispersed, one nation dominant and then another. Shakespeare speaks of “the rise and fall of great ones that ebb and flow with the moon.”

In one lifetime I have seen my own fellow countrymen ruling over a quarter of the world, the great majority of them convinced, in the words of what is still a favorite song, that, “God who’s made the mighty would make them mightier yet.” I’ve heard a crazed, cracked Austrian proclaim to the world the establishment of a German Reich that would last a thousand years; an Italian clown announce that he would restart the calendar to begin his own assumption of power. I’ve heard a murderous Georgian brigand in the Kremlin acclaimed by the intellectual elite of the world as wiser than Solomon, more enlightened than Ashoka, more humane than Marcus Aurelius. I’ve seen America wealthier and in terms of weaponry, more powerful than the rest of the world put together, so that Americans, had they so wished, could have outdone an Alexander or a Julius Caesar in the range and scale of their conquests.

All in one little lifetime. All gone with the wind. England part of a tiny island off the coast of Europe, threatened with dismemberment and even bankruptcy. Hitler and Mussolini dead, remembered only in infamy. Stalin a forgotten name in the regime he helped found and dominate for some three decades. America haunted by fears of running out of those precious fluids that keep her motorways roaring, and the smog settling, with troubled memories of a disastrous campaign in Vietnam, and the victories of the Don Quixotes of the media as they charged the windmills of Watergate.

All in one lifetime, all gone. Gone with the wind.

Behind the debris of these self-styled, sullen supermen and imperial diplomats, there stands the gigantic figure of one person, because of whom, by whom, in whom, and through whom alone mankind might still have hope. The person of Jesus Christ.

[See sidebar for Malcolm Muggeridge’s thoughts on earthly powers and the hope of mankind.]

The danger of being formed by politics

– In Romans 12, Paul encourages us not to be conformed to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul expands upon this idea, teaching that we Christians speak “not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.” Rather, through the Spirit, we have been given access to “the mind of Christ.”

In today’s context, the “rulers of this age” speak in political ideologies. We Mennonites must keep in mind that while many of these ideologies are influenced by Judeo-Christian thinking, they still basically represent the “wisdom of this age” on the saints” (Revelation 13). So, while governmental power can help provide some order and stability within a society, ultimately it is the spiritual condition of that society that will determine its character, and it is the spiritual power of Christ that provides our only hope for true and everlasting reform. Just days after the 2008 presidential election, columnist Cal Thomas shared these thoughts with demoralized evangelicals:

Scripture teaches that God’s power (if that is what conservative evangelicals want and not their puny attempts at grabbing earthly power) is made perfect in weakness. He speaks of the tiny mustard seed, the seemingly worthless widow’s mite, of taking the last place at the table and the humbling of one’s self, the washing of feet and similar acts and attitudes; the still, small voice. How did conservative evangelicals miss this and instead settle for a lesser power, which in reality is no power at all? When did they settle for an inferior “kingdom”?

Evangelicals are at a junction. They can take the path that will lead them to more futility and ineffective attempts to reform culture through government, or they can embrace the far more powerful methods outlined by the One they claim to follow. By following His example, they will decrease, but He will increase. They will get no credit, but they will see results. If conservative evangelicals choose obscurity and seek to glorify God, they will get much of what they hope for, but can never achieve, in and through politics. (“Evangelicals should try a new strategy,” News-Record.com, November 7, 2008)
and not the “mind of Christ.” At their core, these ideological packages are grounded upon a humanistic worldview and are full of compromises needed to ensure political success.

As we become more involved in partisan politics and political outcomes, research shows that our thinking is likely to be altered in the process. In fact, in a recent major study of religion in America, Robert Putnam and David Campbell conclude that “most people change their religion to fit their politics. They don’t change their politics to fit their religion” (*American Grace: How Religion Divide and Unites Us*). The danger here is as we Anabaptists become political, we are also more likely to conform our minds to the ideological patterns of this world.

**The danger of alienating those to whom we are called to minister** – The Kingdom of God transcends all earthly boundaries, and we are given a mandate from King Jesus to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18). To accomplish this we need to build meaningful relationships with others across the spectrum, perhaps even “sinners and tax collectors.” That is where Christian political involvement is hurting the cause of evangelism.

As Christians have aligned with partisan politics in an attempt to promote their values within society, an increasing number of people have ended up feeling judged and even hated as a result. And when one listens to the passionate and sometimes vitriolic tone of some of the rhetoric surrounding hot-button political issues, it is not surprising that many non-Christians feel personally opposed by the followers of Jesus. In the end, the message of Christ suffers, as unloving political messages result in closed doors relationally.

Additionally, there is growing evidence that the ‘culture wars’ are producing spiritual collateral damage. According to Putnam and Campbell, an unprecedented 35% - 40% of younger Americans claim to have no religious affiliation at all! Digging for the cause of this disengagement, the study found that young adults cited “the politicization of religion” as the main reason why they have become cynical about faith. Ironically, by using the political process to create for their children a society that reflects their religious values, these Christians run the risk of spiritually alienating the very children they had hoped would inherit the society they built.

So how do we as evangelical Anabaptists live out our calling to be salt and light in a lost and violent world? In light of the dangers, must we avoid politics altogether? Shouldn’t our voice as citizens count in influencing our government for good? The answers to these questions are not always easy. Certainly, as people who know the Creator personally, we should be the first to stand for the sanctity of life and for human dignity. In addition, we must find ways to serve “the least of these,” as Jesus taught. However, when considering political solutions, the key is that we conscientiously weigh the spiritual implications of our actions.

Here are a few things that should guide our thinking: first, let us guard our allegiances, and make sure that no cause, regardless of how righteous it is, supplants the primacy of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom relationships in our lives; second, let’s not put our hope in coercive solutions when spiritual solutions are possible; third, let’s learn to speak the truth in love, and when the political voice cannot do that, let’s use another medium. And above all, as we look out over the kingdoms of this world in all their glory, let’s remember where true power lies – for we serve at the pleasure of the King of Kings, and “in him we live and move and have our being.”

Dan Ziegler, president of Rosedale Bible College, considers himself a conscientious abstainer from the political process.