

Family feud: Politics in a small church

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

When I arrived as pastor at Beech Grove United Methodist Church, the community was bitterly divided because one member was running against another to be county commissioner. The primary issue in the campaign was whether to zone Beech Grove Road, on which sat Beech Grove Church. Issues of class weren't far behind. Those in favor of zoning wanted progress, growth, economic opportunity—and viewed their opponents as squirrel-eating backwoods rednecks. Those against zoning were for private ownership and for having the government butt out of their business—and viewed their opponents as elitist Yankee know-it-alls.

To make matters worse, the church member who was pro-zoning came from the church's old-money family. The anti-zoning candidate came from a family of new money. One parishioner said to me, "You got to understand, the Clintons were originally landowners, and the Landises were originally sharecroppers." Memories can outlive their usefulness. The Clintons were no longer wealthy, the Landises no longer poor. But words like *elitist* and *upstart* and *snob* and *white trash* have a way of lingering. As Faulkner said, the past isn't dead, it's not even past.

As a graduate of Duke Divinity School, schooled in Stanley Hauer was's Christian pacifism, believing that the church is the primary location of God's work in the world, what did I do? Well, I identified which side was going to lose the election and made friends with that side. I took those people's side on trivial matters and accepted more of their dinner invitations. I isolated the headstrong advocate on the other side, befriended all his friends, left him on the outs socially. Then, when "my" side lost, I could commiserate more readily.

The side that won didn't care, and in the end we lost only one family from the membership rolls. It was sheer power politics, calculated not around the logic of the gospel but around keeping a community together. By the end we'd gained three families back and the church, 80 members strong, grew by 10 percent in my time

there, and even built a building.

I basically preached one sermon while I was there: God loved us while we were yet enemies; how much more should we love our own enemies? Precisely there, among them, we meet the risen Christ.

I wish I could say it's that sermon that "worked," but I think more important was whatever personal skills I happened to have. I may have learned more of what I needed to be a pastor in my college fraternity than in seminary; more from coming from a family of divorce than from my church internships—learned more, that is, about how to build consensus, get people who don't necessarily like you to work with you, and keep meeting several times a week without killing one another.

This is no knock on theology. I prize what I learned at Duke. I'm tempted to say that the more obscure the teaching, the better. A friend tells a story about a surly undergraduate who raised a hand during a lecture on the doctrine of the Trinity to say, "This is all irrelevant to me. I'm a marketing major. How could this ever help me to sell a taco?" My friend's answer: it won't, because theology is useless. He meant that in the best sense. Theology is its own end: the praise of God. It's not meant to be used as an instrument for some higher good. I loved patristic trinitarian debates precisely because they were useless—the "point" of the Trinity was to learn to contemplate God. The tacos will have to sell themselves.

Others who believe in doctrine and want it to be applicable to our ordinary lives have sought to stretch the former to cover the latter a bit. They call it social trinitarianism and reflect on the three persons as an ideal model for human persons in relationship.

Social trinitarianism was then and still is a popular way to talk about the Trinity in learned circles. As God is one and three, so the argument goes, we as church or body politic should also be united and plural. I have some sense that this theme has declined in fashion as patristic scholars have cast doubt on whether patristic theologians themselves actually talked this way. There may be *something* to it still—whatever identity and difference is wholesomely among us is surely a reflection of the identity and difference that God already is. But was I to tell the Clintons and the Landises to imitate the Trinity?

Lucky for me I didn't have to. One of the Trinity became incarnate and died, leaving us the pattern for how God would have us live. Not only that, but another member of

the Trinity is poured out on the church in Pentecost, sacraments, life together, to sweep us into the triune life. The Trinity, in short, is not something “up there” that we try and strain our gaze to look at and imitate, but something “down here,” in Christ, in the church, straining us through enemy love into divine love. Augustine makes this point clear in his *Confessions*—we strain our vision upward looking for God, and then stumble over the crucified slave at our feet. So maybe theology isn’t as useless for church life as it is for taco marketing—it’s just *difficult* to relate to church life.

But does the doctrine argue for the kind of power politics described above?

The Trinity doesn’t tell the Clintons and the Landises how to live. It doesn’t tell the rest of us who to vote for or how to keep a church from splitting. The Trinity says that One on the cross, who was raised three days later—that that One is God, not less than the One who sent him. And that that One who blows life through the church through history and through space and time now—that that One is God, not less than the One on the cross who was raised three days later. How do we get along at election time? Who knows? Only the One who is Lord knows, the One who will judge us all—even, or especially, when we think we’re choosing our rulers.

I preached this theme one Trinity Sunday, using a famous quote from Augustine. Michael, a Hemingway-bearded old farmer, nodded in appreciation. “If you understand it, it is not God. I like it.” It was the most theological thing he ever said to me. And it came from hearing that we cannot understand what the triune nature is, let alone what to go and do about it. Why exactly would a farmer like that point so much, a point about how little we understand and how much less we can put our understanding to use? One who couldn’t control when it would rain or what the market would do, but could work hard and pray for the best? It was *his* job to figure out what to go and *do* because of the triune life among us. I just preached the lectionary text that the church served up that Sunday.

I was struck during that zoning controversy how little I did to keep the church together. The ones really leading were the old ladies—molasses-sweet, blue-haired, Bible-believing old ladies who attended our Wednesday night prayer meeting.

The dispute did hurt our church. Longtime members threatened to leave, or at least resign leadership posts (which they left effectively vacant anyway). People worried openly about a church split. In one administrative board meeting I found myself with

one candidate and his spouse and the campaign manager of the other and his spouse. The two men had once been close friends. Their sons still were. They'd known each other since their baptisms. Their parents still talked about how wonderful the other's grandparents were. And their dispute wasn't nearly as nasty or personal as that between their wives. But the two couples were not speaking. How were we to pass a budget together?

The most painful part was that they were all good people who still knew how to get their hands dirty and fix a motor, prepare a casserole and teach a Sunday school lesson, and in their business lives they could balance a million-dollar budget. But they could not, for the life of them (or their pastor), get along.

And precisely there is the small church's glory. You can't avoid the person you hate. You can't wiggle out of the meeting with the person you're not speaking to. And so you have a shot at being Christian.

Amid the tumult I had to deal with "prayer meetin'," as we North Carolinians call it. When I first became pastor and heard such a meeting existed I was primed to kill it. I'd insist on having communion each time it met, or I'd be otherwise engaged every Wednesday night—anything, to avoid a Baptist-style "sweet hour of prayer."

And Baptist it was—every member had been a Baptist at some point (this is common among Methodists in the rural South). Some had left when a Baptist church divided, or had left the Baptists over a dispute with a pastor. They were (mostly) glad for Methodist polity in which a bishop can step into a church fight and impose order, for they had all seen Baptist churches dash themselves against the rocks of infighting. Occasionally, they were none too happy when they heard where their tithes were going. When the United Methodists made sympathetic noises about gay people or pacifists, they fumed. "Why don't we go independent?" one asked me.

Wait—weren't you the one who saw the Baptist church run that poor family out for its tastes in music or use of lipstick or its misinterpretation of Leviticus? They never meant it.

If someone was sick, the prayer meeting would anoint that person. If someone not present was sick, they'd anoint someone present as a proxy on the ill person's behalf. One night a woman proudly displayed a rock she'd been given at a conference. It had a Star of David on it. "The speaker gave it to us as a reminder that anyone who blesses Israel will be blessed, and if America doesn't bless Israel,

we'll be cursed" (they only *thought* they didn't like sacraments—they adored the physical places where God meets us). Another asked me once whether, when the rapture comes, China would be invading the United States—she had heard China had the biggest army in the world. Courageous Bible teacher that I was, I told her that the North Koreans actually have a bigger army.

One Sunday a visitor stood up during service and began shouting: "The Lord is going to burn this world up with fire! We better be ready! We need the gifts of the Holy Ghost!" We waited for him to stop and leave. One of the ladies on her way out of church said to me, "Did you hear him? He says he told us what the Holy Ghost told him to. And I believe him!"

But another of the prayer meetin' ladies didn't care for all the screaming. "That was real ugly the way he did that. He should shout at his own church if he wants to carry on that way."

I told her he handed me \$100 on his way out. "He said it was a gift from the Holy Ghost."

"He did?" She thought a minute. "Well that was real nice of him, wasn't it? Did you tell him he could come back?"

Eventually I found myself going to prayer meeting, and wishing for its success, because we sure needed prayer. I could hardly have a conversation with anyone in the community, church member or not, in which the election didn't come up. Typical comments: Can you believe what Clinton said? Have you heard what Landis did? How can a Christian act that way? Do you know his daddy has money and wants this zoning plan so he can make more of it? They had a meeting the other night and they was cussin' and drinkin'—can you believe it? They expect me to go to church with those people? And so on.

The only people who didn't talk about the election incessantly were the prayer ladies. That's because they were talking incessantly about Jesus, about getting people saved, about healing sick people and about making America more Christian. (I was for all these things, even the last, though it meant something different to me.) When politics came up in prayer meeting, no one was shocked. These women had been through a lot of life. They had buried family members and spouses and friends, seen prodigal sons and daughters wander off and never return. That's precisely why they prayed so hard. So they weren't surprised or aghast at what people are capable

of doing. They just “lifted it up to the Lord,” letting it weigh on Jesus’ shoulders instead of their own.

This isn’t to say the prayer ladies didn’t have opinions on the election. But it wasn’t the most important thing. It wasn’t even on their list of the top ten most important things. It was just another item on the prayer list: that the church wouldn’t be hurt, that souls wouldn’t be twisted by the political finagling, that joy in denouncing someone else wouldn’t turn into that worst of all sins—pride.

Their example encouraged me. More than that, they got after me. If I hinted that scripture wasn’t always historically reliable, they let me know about it. If I started doubting that God could do miracles, they set me straight. There was a toughness in them that made you quiver. One lady, who sang in the choir, noticed that the choir member behind her wasn’t joining in to sing “Praise God” at the right moment. So during the choir’s Sunday performance, decked out in blue robes and leading us all in song, she turned around at the right instant and barked at her colleague, “Praise God.” It is right to praise God. Now shape up.

Once I tried to defer a decision in the passive-aggressive hope that someone else would make the hard choice. I joked “Don’t ask me, I only work here.” A beloved member of the prayer meeting came right back: “No you don’t, you lead here.”

Heartened by their example, I started praying for our elected leaders in Sunday service, as Christians have always done. I prayed over the election and asked that we would witness to our faith in public in this and in all our lives.

Lo and behold, the ninth chapter of Romans came up in the lectionary, with its description of God’s “election” of us in Christ. My sermon title that Sunday was “The Election.” I opened, “No, not that one.” I said that there is another election far more important than this one, which only seemed important. With the encouragement of the prayer ladies, our “biggest crisis” was set in perspective. November would come and go and the church would be here another hundred years to bury these candidates’ grandchildren, as long as someone was praying on Wednesday night.

One of them noticed I preached a much more Wesleyan sermon not long after, insisting we are free to respond to God’s mercy with repentance . . . or not.

“Isn’t that different than what you said about election before?” He asked.

“Yes, but this biblical text said something different,” I said, hoping he wouldn’t accuse me of saying the Bible disagreed with itself.

“Got it,” he responded, satisfied that I was just being biblical, not just being confusing.

Those prayer ladies were Beech Grove’s genuine leaders. People didn’t come to church for the preaching or the programming or the music. They came because of those women. When one told you she was praying for you, it meant something. When one hugged you, you remembered it all week. When one cooked for you, the casserole tasted like someone loved you. And when you were around them, you were in the presence of Jesus. Their presence, their dogged refusal to let the church be merely political, kept the church’s fabric from pulling apart. We were about Jesus, after all, not anything so parochial as a county board election. And the way to stay about Jesus was to forgive like Jesus forgives, to treat enemies like God does—with kindness.

When the election came, Clinton was voted out. Landis had some missteps early in his commissionership, which Clinton reveled in. The election didn’t go away. When we argued about whether and how to build a new parsonage, the argument fell along party lines. All of Clinton’s people were for it; Landis’s people were against it.

But eventually the election did fade from our consciousness—not because its effects vanished, but because the church remembered its first job was to be the church. It remembered that both Clinton and Landis and all their friends and kin belonged there and none would be kicked out for doing something they shouldn’t. That the prayer ladies were right: when things are bad, pray. Then pray again. Pray harder. Then pray some more. And “praise God!” already. Do that, and the church will redirect itself toward Jesus and away from its own pettiness. So we were transformed, at least a little, slowly, and with difficulty.

Clinton later told me of something that happened in church quite against his will. During the passing of the peace, directly before the communion liturgy, he found himself face to face with Landis. Instead of frowning or turning away, he reached out his hand. “I couldn’t believe I did that,” he said. “But if there’s anyplace where we should be friends, it’s right there, before the Lord’s Supper.”

That’s the church at its best: forgiving before it knows what it’s doing, erring on the side of grace.

The church has even gained some new members since I left, which suggests a health and vitality that were never lost, only threatened. The church survived and will continue to. The credit again goes to the prayer ladies.

Church denominations like the United Methodist are only as good as these small parishes—and these parishes are only as good as the ladies' prayer meetings. In a sense, the church rests on their shoulders. Good thing they're hunched in prayer.

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