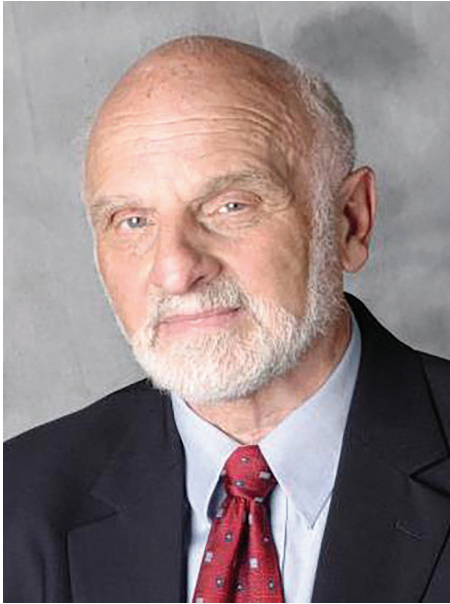


Anticipating the Election

By Walter Brueggemann



Walter Brueggemann is widely considered one of the most influential Old Testament scholars and theologians of the last several decades. His work often focuses on the Hebrew prophetic tradition and sociopolitical imagination of the church. He argues that Christians must provide a counter narrative to the dominant forces of consumerism, militarism, and nationalism. He is a co-founder of Journal for Preachers.

The up-coming November election is a time of great moment in our national history. It is, for that reason, important for the church and its preachers to weigh in with a gospel perspective on the national body politic. In what follows, I offer a probe into the resources the preachers of the church have for such a time of great responsibility. It will be a great mistake if the preachers of the church keep silent out of fear of being partisan, because the only partisan interest preachers must have is to bear witness to the requirements and gifts of the coming rule of God. In the sphere of public politics, the claims of the gospel can only be proximate; but for that reason they are not unimportant nor to be neglected. It is my hope and expectation that preachers may address these matters in a sustained way in the time remaining before the election.

The central insistence of the gospel for the body politic, I suggest, is that the public enterprise be properly ordered as a *covenant*. Such a premise permits gospel interpreters to mobilize the materials of the Bible and to advocate for a particular discernment and practice of public power, public goods, and public access to those goods.

Such an advocacy must, in the community of faith, begin with clarity about *the character of God* who is the engine for a viable public life. It is of course not sufficient to begin with “God,” but a case must be made for the particularity of the God of the gospel who is to be contrasted with the alternative gods of greed and self-sufficiency. Nowhere is that contrast between the gods given greater dramatic expression than in Elijah’s contest at Mount Carmel. In that dramatic moment the prophet declares:

If the Lord is God, follow him;
but if Baal, then follow him (I Kings 18:21).

We are always choosing gods, that is, alternative sources of meaning and purpose (Joshua 24:14-15). In the Elijah narrative, YHWH and Baal embody alternative theological options. But the soon-to-follow narrative of Naboth's vineyard makes clear that each God brings along a socio-economic political tilt as well (I Kings 21). Thus YHWH, patron of Naboth the small peasant landowner, was preoccupied with the protection and wellbeing of the vulnerable peasants in the economy, whereas Baal is the guarantor of the predatory policies and practices of Ahab and Jezebel. The church must make clear that such *God-claims* are always accompanied by *policy priorities* of quite specific kinds. The matter is vigorously articulated in Psalm 115. On the one hand, the idols

... are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths but do not speak;
eyes but do not see.
They have ears but do not hear,
noses but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel,
feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats (vv. 4-7).

The gods are *objects*, without any capacity for action or agency. YHWH, the God of the covenant, by contrast is marked by active "steadfast love and faithfulness," and is capable of giving blessings and causing "increase of children." The God of the gospel is an agent capable of transformative action.

This God of active agency makes covenant, variously, with the creation and all its creatures, and with Israel. That is, this God enters into dialogic interaction and fidelity, so that the lesser party can have a say in the relationship. This God as sovereign issues non-negotiable commandments, but then hears and answers prayers and attends to the least of those who voice their need and anguish. Thus the covenant this God makes is vigorously bilateral, so that *holy power* and *creaturely vulnerability* are effectively engaged with each other. The primary commandment of this holy God of covenant-making is that the covenant partner, particularly Israel, should be engaged in *neighbor-love* wherein the neighbor is loved, valued, and protected as one loves, values, and protects one's own self. Thus neighbor-love becomes the hallmark of a gospel ethic. Over time, the biblical testimony evolves concerning identity of the neighbor that comes to include "widow, orphan, and immigrants," and eventually the neighbor is seen to be "the one who shows mercy" and the one who needs mercy (Luke 10:36-37).

Thus the covenant God makes with Israel becomes a model for social relationships of interaction between the strong and the weak, the haves and the have-nots. As

God and God's partner collude in the care of creation, so the strong and the weak in the body politic are bound together in the sharing of the common good. This shared work for the common good requires investment of resources in a way that serves all members of the community. Investment in the common good, moreover, means to curb predatory wealth and unbridled social power. The Bible is vigilant about predatory wealth all the way from the reach of royal power that concerns only self-interest, to the reach of the rich fool whose greed turned out to be destructive (Luke 12:13-21). We may take the inventory of Samuel concerning predatory royal power with the rise of kingship in Israel as a measure of covenantal resistance:

This will be the ways of the king who will reign over you; he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariot; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best to your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his couriers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and couriers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves (I Samuel 8: 11-17).

Thus Moses completes the Ten Commandments with a final urgent prohibition:

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:17)

This mandate to protect the vulnerable includes these elements:

- The rule of law is everywhere non-negotiable as it is vouchsafed by the governance of God. The final chapter of the Book of Judges with its barbarism is a model where there is no rule of law and "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). When there is such unbridled freedom, the big ones will always eat the little ones. It is the purpose of law to protect the vulnerable from the predatory.
- The norm of the law is justice: Justice and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you (Deuteronomy 16:20). The justice administered in the covenantal tradition is not retributive, but rather restorative with an aim of rehabilitating the vulnerable who lose out in the rough and tumble of "real world economics." In the horizon of the covenant, justice intends to reinstate the vulnerable in the active life of the economy. It does so through provision for the "Year of Release" wherein debts are canceled

(Deuteronomy 15:1-18), and the “Year of Jubilee” wherein there is restoration of property and viability (Leviticus 25).

- The exercise of justice requires the restraint of predation. Thus the covenantal-prophetic tradition is relentless in its repudiation of avarice that reduces neighbors to debtors and eventually to peonage. The curbing of greed is accomplished through law and regulation.
- The exercise of justice requires public generosity toward those who are disenfranchised in the economy. Characteristically and recurrently this pertains to people of color who have for a very long time been exploited by white capitalists. Thus public generosity concerns proper funding for the viability, security, and dignity of “the least.” This must of necessity include:
 - Housing that is available, secure, and on offer for those with low or no income;
 - Health care that is on offer for all persons in the community. At the present time, we have a two-tiered health system that is dramatically and willfully tilted toward those with sufficient resources; redress is essential;
 - Education that is open and available for all that may include job-training but also nurture in the arts and humanities.
 - Justice entails both restraint and generosity for an economy that is just, well-ordered, and peaceable. For that reason justice cannot be administered in excessively private ways, but in ways that are aimed a rehabilitation and viability in the community and in the political economy.

When we factor in these covenantal claims in terms of the election, we may consider how candidates and policies approximate such considerations. Of course in the “real world” of conventional politics, no candidate can be direct and straight-forward about such inclinations. Thus one may attend to the tilt of arguments and to the “grammar” of the way in which social power and social possibility are articulated. The important point is that we Christians do well to have our political choices informed, not by habit or by tradition, or by partisan zeal, or by self-interest, but by the elemental claims of our covenantal faith. The work is to translate these definitional claims of our faith into practical realities. To that end I suggest we may appeal to Paul’s ethical “therefore” in Romans 12, a declaration that we may take, in Christian tradition, as a compelling articulation of the implications of Moses’s vision at Sinai. In that declaration Paul formulates an ethic that refuses “conformity” to conventional social practice, and instead invites to a “transformed” social practice that derives from his conviction concerning God’s grace. In that declaration, we may focus on three aspects of Paul’s insistence, though the chapter teems with possibilities:

1. Paul accents hospitality:

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers (Romans 12:13).

The practice of welcome and the offer of “home cooking” are not only for the community of faith, but extend to include strangers, those who do not share faith. This note on hospitality to strangers surely is an echo of the mandate of Moses:

... who executes justice for the orphan and then widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

On the horizon are those outside the community, those who might otherwise be perceived as a “dangerous other,” but who are to be welcomed as participants in the wideness of God’s care.

Such hospitality is the antithesis of *hostility*. It is possible that the community of faith might exclude others in hostile ways, in a defensive posture to protect the sanctity and safety of the community. But Paul sees no need for such self-protection. It is the free grace of God that enables us to welcome would-be threats and to confirm them as co-sharers in God’s goodness.

Later on the Pauline tradition will declare that the sacrifice of Christ

... has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us (Ephesians 2:14).

Thus we might assess political choices by considering a spectrum of *hospitality-hostility* to see which policy of candidate might be more likely to be positive toward the “other” who is unlike us.

2. Paul writes of generosity:

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith, ministry, in ministering, the teacher in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity, the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness (Romans 12:6-8).

Being generous is a gift from the Spirit, given by the God who specializes in abundance. The endless giving of God is evident in the overflowing of blessing in creation:

The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season;
you open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing (Psalm 145:15-16).

God gives out of God’s bottomless storehouse of blessing that saturates the earth that can bring forth food in abundance. Congruent with such creative overflow, the

saving rescue by God of those in need is limitless, a capacity of reaching out in every instance of need. The manna narrative of Exodus 16 is evidence of the gift of bread that supplies all that is needed for hungry Israel, some needing much, some needing less. In his bid for a church offering, Paul writes:

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work (II Corinthians 9:7-8).

Paul affirms God's abundance, and then asks the congregation to respond to God's abundance with a generosity of their own.

This covenantal accent on generosity is an alternative to *parsimony* in which we keep all we can for ourselves, often to the neglect and disregard of the neighbor. Parsimony is grounded in the defining fear of scarcity: "There is not enough to go around, so best get all I can and keep all I can for myself." In the context of God's abundance, parsimony is misguided fear that is rooted in a lack of trust in God's goodness. Thus we might assess political choices by considering a spectrum of *generosity-parsimony* to see which policy or which candidate is more likely to enact open-handedness, most particularly among those with the greatest need. The enactment of parsimony in the body politic consists in deregulation that lets economic leverage go unchecked, and by lower taxation that denies the common good of adequate funding. There is no doubt that generosity can be performed in the public sphere when there is sufficient acknowledgement of neighbors, especially those neighbors without political leverage.

3. In Romans 12 Paul does not write directly about forgiveness. He does, however, conclude his catalogue of ethics with a critical reflection on vengeance that we may take to be the alternative to forgiveness:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:19-21).

Vengeance is grounded in *quid pro quo* thinking that intends to repay in kind. The classic articulation of vengeance is in the formula in the most ancient law collection in Israel: If any harm follows, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe (Exodus 21:23-25).

It may well be that the formula originally intended to limit vengeance to not more than an equivalence. But it is indeed grounded in calculated score-keeping to be sure that every agent of damage receives back in kind. (It is worth noting that this

formula is identified by Donald Trump as his favorite biblical teaching.)

In his writing Paul dismisses the practice of vengeance as the opposite of constructive conduct. To be sure, Paul anticipates that there would be vengeance because the creation is well governed, but such vengeance is in God's hands, with reference to Deuteronomy 32:39-42. As a consequence human vengeance is neither permitted nor required to avenge ourselves, but we may be confident that in God's goodness appropriate responses are made to affront. Human vengeance seems to us essential only when we imagine that the world is not well-ordered by God and so tilted toward justice. Thus we propose to "take justice into our own hands."

But Jesus directly contradicts this old teaching:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to anyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you (Matthew 5:38-42).

For good reason Paul knows better than the old teaching. He knows that God weighs in on every affront. For that reason, the church need not and cannot be open to human vengeance. The great alternative commended by Paul is to forego vengeance and instead to act constructively to offer food and drink to those who do damage. That is, the work is to turn such persons into neighbors. Paul is not innocent that such a generous response to damage carries a sting of its own. Such forgiveness chooses to disregard the affront and to get on with the responsible human business of creating community. Paul knows as well that retaliatory evil cannot defeat evil, even though we keep trying to use evil to prevail. Rather it is goodness that drives out evil, that offers a different way in the world. Thus we may ask about policies and candidates who live by grievance and retaliation, and those with the gracious capacity to break the chain of affronts by an act of forgiveness, refusing to continue to contribute to the quid pro quo process of getting even.

Thus we may construct a three-fold taxonomy by which to assess policies and candidates according to Paul's inventory:

- *hospitality-hostility*;
- *generosity-parsimony*;
- *forgiveness-vengeance*.

The triad of *hostility-parsimony-vengeance* supports a politics of small-minded anti-neighborliness that creates an environment of fear in which we never stop brooding about affronts and in which we choose candidates and policies that are excessively self-protecting, while evoking conflict and alienation into the neighborhood.

The alternative triad of *hospitality-generosity-forgiveness*, by contrast, makes possible a political economy that can be a source of immense good. It does not cater

to our bottomless fear, but rather tilts forward in hope and new social possibility. We will never find policies or candidates that fully and simply embrace this life-giving triad, but we can notice important differences of tone and accent to make proximate judgments. How we sort matters out through these competing triads tells much about the kind of culture in which we choose to live. This either/or of the two triads reflects the double-mindedness of American democracy from the beginning. On the one hand, one triad offers a baseline of unfettered exercise of our most acute anti-neighborly propensity through unrestrained capitalism, not least in slave-produced cotton. On the other hand, from the outset American democracy has proposed to be a “city set on a hill,” and an embodiment of welcoming wellbeing that specializes in human dignity, human security, and human justice. We opt for one or the other of these visions every time we vote. The either/or is operative in our moment of political responsibility.

A caveat: I am not unaware that this way of sketching our political landscape in these two triads will sound like an endorsement of Joe Biden, for Donald Trump so easily participates in the other triad. That, however, is not a reason that we should neglect to offer a thoughtful, critical consideration of options from the vantage point of our faith. The matter pertains, moreover, not only to presidential elections, but all the way down the ticket. There is not any aspect of our political advocacy and participation in which these competing triads are not operative. There is ample material for study and proclamation, without any need for partisanship. The preachers of the church have important work to do!