

With this essay by [James Cubie](#) the Institute continues a new series begun in September that will appear monthly (the second Wednesday of the month), with contributions from members of the [Company of Teachers](#) designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce and circulate these pieces as you see fit.

The Identity Politics of Ents

On November 18th, 2016, Mark Lilla wrote “[The End of Identity Liberalism](#)” in the New York Times. In it, Lilla charged that the Democratic candidate lost the Presidential election because the party had doubled down on “Identity Politics” - an ideology based in gender, racial, and sexual identities.

Lilla maintained that the Democrats’ use of “Identity Politics” alienated a large portion of the electorate: The white working class who reside in what has been called the “Rust Belt”, some of whom voted for Obama in 2012, but switched to Trump in 2016.

Lilla wrote as a liberal concerned to understand why – in his words – the Democratic Party has failed for “a generation” to cast a vision which most Americans can sign on to. Lilla, however, brushed aside the extent to which Trump successfully mobilized voters by using his own brand of identity politics. Lilla was – rightly – taken to task for not giving due attention to this.

In a follow-up [interview](#), Lilla said:

“If you want to reform the American soul, become a minister. But if you’re serious about politics, you have to go where the people are and find a way to reach them, and not be afraid to get dirty.”

All of this raises this question: How should the church understand itself, in the middle of what appears to be a zero-sum politics of “You’re either for us, or against us!”? The Reformed tradition teaches that the people of God are all ministers – a priesthood of all believers; *and*, they are political actors. In other words, I think Lilla points us toward a false dichotomy that we need to overcome.

It seems increasingly impractical to question political orthodoxies of the Left or the Right: “You’re either with us, or against us!” As soon as you begin to question one side, a Tweet, or post, appears, that says: “But what about this?! The other side did this!” Those of us who do not see a straight line drawn from the witness of Scripture to the platforms of *either* political party, must seem to the rest like a

woefully naïve, and unhelpfully neutral bunch. We must seem like the Ents, in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: Forever weighing our choices, while Mordor advances. But the good reason that the church need not bow to Manichean political pressure, is the realistic picture of personal and political realities provided by the Reformed tradition.

Our understanding of the human person, follows the nuanced anthropology that Paul, the Reformers, and our Confessions describe: We are a combination of body, spirit, "flesh" (the problematic human passions), and sin (as a power broken, but resident in every person). Because this is true, we do not think our identities are inerrant sources of revelation: The *Deutsche Christen*, for example, are a permanent reminder of this.

Reformed anthropology teaches that precisely because we are fallen, each of us has a great capacity for intended and unintended evil. Therefore, we cannot pretend that our political life together is built on anything other than "crooked timber" (Kant). And – when used responsibly – this anthropology does not excuse a-historical thinking; it does not allow us to forget the kind of house we built *with* this crooked timber. For example: Any honest assessment of American life, will own our original sin of slavery, which still plays itself out in ways that must be identified, and repented of.

The Reformed tradition also advocates for a healthy distinction between earthly and heavenly kingdoms – between state and church. The distinction has proved vital when it maintains that a good political platform can only *approximate* the kingdom of God. We can use this distinction because we have a good, working vision from Jesus of what the kingdom is like, and therefore can measure what presents itself as a 'kingdom' – a power – against that standard. That standard should allow us to have a healthy, non-idolatrous relationship with any politics, and it is what should form the basis of prophetic critique of any unhealthy – or even demonic – political arrangement.

If we follow a "Seek first the kingdom of God politics", then we will never be completely at home in either political party. The Church will always be the gadfly in the room. And a good indication that we have ceased to be that, will be when people no longer try to swat us away: "Don't worry – we're just here to help!", we will say. "Good, then you can stay", they will say.

The other option is to believe – consciously or unconsciously – that there is a straight line from the witness of Scripture to one political platform, and then to remain silent in the name of: “Well, you have to choose a side, because compromise is the language of the Devil.” Fine. But when we choose to remain silent in the face of something unacceptable, because we think it is politically expedient, everyone knows what that is: Hypocrisy. And Jesus hated that far more than unrighteousness; far more than people living in flagrant sin.

I believe the way to enter more fully into this “Seek first the kingdom politics”, is to retrieve the practices of holiness *for the church*. These practices are not meant to separate us from the world – they are meant to provide the means to cooperate with God in building God’s new creation, beginning with us.

The Reformed tradition’s commitment to holiness of heart and life, was the marrow in its bones for generations. And its emphasis on holiness – sanctification – was often what allowed it to step outside the personal and political orthodoxies of a given time, and name them inadequate, or unholy. Only a people who are never neutral about their membership in the kingdom of God, can truly serve the soul and politics of America. If we do not engage in the practices of God’s new creation, then we will simply be functionaries of the old creation – we will be a ‘priesthood’ of what is passing away.