

Politics 2016: What is a Christian to Do?

Subtitle: The Bigger Story: Jesus is our Hope

Many years ago, a young soldier serving in the South Pacific mailed in his ballot for the 1944 presidential election, which featured FDR and Thomas Dewey. Today Roger is 96, and voting in his nineteenth presidential election. He told an interviewer that he believes this election is the most volatile of any he has ever seen, and the most important. My first opportunity to vote in a presidential election was in 1980 which was a Carter Reagan match up. Perhaps because of my youthful zeal my mother voted for the first and only time in her life.

It is true that politics is always a messy business. It is historically inaccurate to romanticize other eras as filled with peace and good will. Here is a quote from a previous campaign. “that electing “this person” would create a nation where “murder, robbery, rape, adultery and incest will openly be taught and practiced.” And that was the soft stuff. Jefferson vs Adams 1800

While I am of the thought that there is nothing new under the sun, many feel that something has shifted in our public discourse. In a recent lecture, Jill Lepore, a Harvard historian, looks at presidential debates over the past 100 years. She plays clips from the first debates and compares them with today’s debates and makes a pretty convincing case that we are reaching new depths in mean-spirited debate. She says we are losing the ability to be civil in the way we argue with one another.

Why does this election seem to have so many roweled up? The stakes are high, of course. Justice Scalia has died and his seat remains open on the Supreme Court. Justice Breyer is 78, Justice Kennedy is 80, and Justice Ginsburg is 83. The next president could possibly appoint four Supreme Court justices, shaping the court for more than a generation.

The US and the West are at war with ISIS, an enemy we can’t see and don’t really understand. We now can see beheadings and other atrocities on our many digital devices. Conflicts abound all over the globe.

Turmoil in Syria and Latin America has caused millions of immigrants to seek refuge in other countries, who have mixed feelings about hosting them.

There are very strong opinions on how to treat various groups of people both foreign and domestic as well as sea change in our cultural norms relating to marriage, gender, law enforcement and other social institutions.

Some of us may be facing economic uncertainty or even financial ruin.

So we are anxious. We are angry, and if social media is any indication we appear to be turning on one another in hateful and vicious ways. This is true both inside and outside the church. I have a very wide spectrum of viewpoints in my facebook circle. I see some mean and nasty exchanges between people who disagree. Even some of you in this audience say some tough things... you know who you are. So in some ways, we seem to be getting swept up in the violent temper of the country.

CS Lewis wrote a brilliant book on spiritual warfare called The Screwtape Letters. Screwtape is a

master tempter teaching a junior demon how to deceive Christians and tempt them away from a pure devotion to Christ. In one letter Screwtape writes:

My Dear Wormwood:

Be sure that the patient remains fixated on politics. Arguments, political gossip and obsessing on the faults of people they have never met serves as an excellent distraction from advancing in personal virtue, character and the things the patient can control. Make sure to keep the patient in a constant state of angst, frustration and disdain for the rest of the human race in order to avoid any kind of charity or inner peace from developing. Ensure that the patient believes that the problem is “out there” and “in the broken system” rather than recognizing that the problem is in himself.

Keep up the good work,

Uncle Screwtape.

Screwtape seems to be doing a pretty good job distracting us this election season.

There are 16 days before the November 8th election and I'd like to spend the next 20 minutes considering the question the prophets asked – how then should we live? What does the Bible have to say that can guide us as we engage and interact with the political process? What does it look like to live faithfully for Christ in these difficult times?

We all have opinions about the candidates and issues. We're not going to talk about that. I'm asking us, as much as is possible, to take a step back from the latest news cycle for a moment and consider together what the Bible has to say about Christians engaging in politics.

There is one important word to think about as we contemplate the earth, say from a vantage point of the space station or the moon at 237,000 miles away. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

That word is Jesus.

I was eleven years old living with my parents and 4 sisters in Kenya in the early seventies. Even then the mid-east was on fire just more so in Israel than everywhere else that we see now. There was starvation in Africa, war in Vietnam and I felt the spirits tug on my heart. I needed a savior. I remember that night when my father immersed me into Christ in the Ruiru river, April 5th it was.

That night I became a Christian. I didn't become a Democrat. I didn't become a Republican. I didn't become a liberal or a conservative. I didn't become a hawk or a dove. I didn't become anything other than a follower of God's own son, Jesus Christ. When I made that decision, I was following in the footsteps of the early disciples:

Mark 1:16-18 Passing along side the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Hopefully each of you has made that same decision to make Jesus Lord of your life. Think back now to that day, to that time. Try to remember the hopelessness of a life without Him and how your simple faith and obedience made all the difference in your life.

Who is this Jesus we've chosen to follow?

Let's review a few biblical truths about Jesus that are particularly relevant as we think of how Christians should engage the political process.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is Lord.

Jesus has defeated the powers.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd

1. Jesus is Lord.

When Thomas sees Jesus after the resurrection he exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" John 20:28

When Paul summarized the gospel for the Roman church, he writes, "If you confess with mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9.

When we decide to follow Jesus, we yield our lives to him as Lord. This means that we give him ultimate authority over our lives. We chose to obey him.

When we say that we believe that Jesus is Lord we are also saying that Jesus is sovereign over all of life. We are saying that Jesus is Lord of History – that there is a higher authority, a greater power, than the man or woman who sits in the Oval Office.

Paul explains in Colossians 1:20 that Jesus, even now, is "reconciling to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross." Do you believe this? Do we believe this?

Jesus, because of his death on the cross, is in the midst of all the chaos of this life, reconciling it to himself. Even in the darkest times, Jesus is restoring order. He is working in the world. He is Lord of the earth.

2. Jesus has defeated the powers.

Paul explains how Jesus has the authority to reconcile all things to himself a few verses later. He says that Jesus, when he died, "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." Colossians 1:15

This is interesting. What are these rulers and authorities? They are spiritual powers that work through

the systems and structures of life. Systems and structures like government, media, business, education, law, and so on. God predisposed us to create these structures to help humanity thrive and prosper. But after the fall, Satan as with all things took them captive and he now twists them to keep people from realizing their God-given purpose.

It seems that Paul is teaching that on the cross, Christ overcame the powers. He is saying that Christ dealt a death blow to the demonic forces holding the systems and structures of life in captivity, and that he even now is in the process of redeeming them.

Everyday we see the brokenness of our political system. We are seeing what can happen when technology and media become demonized. We are seeing the corrupting affect of people seeking power, fame and fortune. We see human behavior at it lowest and most despicable.

But this is not the last word for Christians. We believe that Jesus has defeated the powers; that he has set into motion a long process of redeeming the broken structures that cause so much pain. This redemption will not be complete until he returns, but this is where the story is heading.

In other words, the story of this election is not the only story. We live by a Bigger Story.

3. Jesus is our Good Shepherd.

God doesn't just save us and leave us to figure out life on our own. He makes us a part of his family. Sometimes he describes his relationship to his spiritual family as that of a loving shepherd to a trusting flock.

John 10:15; 27-28 Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd, I know my own and my own know me...my sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

When we become a follower of Christ, we become a member of a new family. We are a church family here in Camp Hill but that is but a small part of the larger family located around this country and the world. Jesus is the loving head of this huge family. He cares for us, guides us, and protects us like a Good Shepherd. He knows each one of us by name. He makes sure no one will snatch us from his hand.

So this is what it means to be a Christian. We are followers of a Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of a virgin, who lived, died and was raised again on the third day., the Son of God,

So to review:

Jesus is our Lord.

He is at work redeeming the world.

He loves us and will never abandon us.

Perhaps this sounds obvious, but sometimes people forget this during election years, in which political pundits tell us what "the evangelical Christian voting block" believes.

There are many narratives explaining why people have turned away from Jesus. Many people simply reject Jesus, but are pushed away by all the baggage, political and otherwise that they see in people identifying with him. We need to do all we can to put no stumbling block in front of those walking beside us.

So let's go all the way back to first principles and remember that a Christian is someone who has chosen to follow Jesus Christ. We are not saved by our political views or commitment to causes, even just ones. Jesus Christ saves us by his blood and that through our faith in and obedience to him..

We must begin here if we want to live faithfully for Christ in this election process. We must begin by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. Have you done that? Are you continuing to do that?

Christians are people who trust Jesus. We put our hope in Jesus.

But just what are we hoping he will do for us?

The short answer we usually give to that question is: Save us from our sins.

But the biblical promises for the faithful extend much beyond that.

When we say we trust in Jesus, we are saying that we trust him with our lives, with our ultimate well-being.

We trust him to make us secure and significant.

We trust him to make us safe and happy.

We trust him with our deepest longings and desires – to be known, to be loved, to have a meaningful life.

All these things are part of the treasures given to us through Christ. Or perhaps a better way of saying this is that those treasures are accessible to us through Christ.

What if we don't get what we want and are searching for? If we don't find it in one place we seek it in another. If we seek fulfillment that only comes from God in other things we are missing the mark. Throughout the bible we are warned against idolatry. As humans, using this measure, we have a struggle with idolatry. In other words, we put our hope in false gods to give our lives meaning, to make us safe and happy.

Sometimes this false god can be a great nation.

This is a major theme in the Book of Isaiah. About the year 734 BC, King Ahaz stood on his balcony in Jerusalem and watched the ferocious Syrian armies storm his city.

God sent the prophet Isaiah to him to tell him not to panic.

But panic he did. Isaiah wrote, "His heart and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake against the wind." Is. 7:2.

There seems to be only one way to save the kingdom: to ask Assyria to save them.

Isaiah brings a word from the Lord to the king. He reminds the king of a Bigger Story, that in the end the king of Assyria does not rule history, the God of Israel does. The prophet begs the king not to put his trust in this mighty nation to save him. Is 7:1-12

But King Ahaz makes a treaty with Assyria anyway. Isaiah calls this a covenant with death. It ends badly.

A generation later, godly king Hezekiah makes another alliance with Egypt to save Israel.

Isaiah warns him not to do it. "In returning to God and in rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength." Is 30:15

Hezekiah rejects the prophet and goes ahead with the alliance.

Isaiah writes in chapters 30 and 33 "Woe to the rebellious children, says the Lord, who carry out a plan that is not from me, who turn an alliance that is not of My spirit, adding sin to sin; Who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my counsel to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh... Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame." Isaiah 33:22; 30:1-2.

So here is the point. God's people get into trouble when they put their hope in a nation, even a great and powerful nation, to save them.

Let's fast forward to present day. Is it wrong to love your country? I hope not. I am increasingly aware, and sorrowful for the sins of this country. When we have no one of high and noble character to choose to be our president it is difficult to be optimistic.

But in many ways I also love my country. I'm very thankful for my country. There is nowhere I would rather live. I have lived in Kenya for several years. It was beautiful and memorable in many ways but when you see the widespread corruption and bribery in all the government institutions, the lack of infrastructure, the extreme poverty and tribalism it is unbelievable how good we have it here. Many of us have traveled this past year posting and bringing back beautiful pictures of canyons, mountains and big sky views. Two weeks ago we were in the Shenandoahs, last week we climbed Mt Pisgah in the North Carolina Smokies. What a grand country we were blessed to be born in!

I personally am very thankful for my country even in times like these.

But there is a fine line between loving your country, and being patriotic and respectful towards your country, and making an idol out of your country.

We cross that line when we begin trusting in our country to make us safe and happy. When we do this we commit idolatry.

Is it possible that one reason why there is so much anxiety among Christians over this election is because we have crossed this line. Might we have put our hope in our country to protect us and this

election raises fears that our country may not be able to do this very well in the future. This is something to think and pray on.

French theologian Jacques Ellul offers this interesting observation on idolatry:

“The machine, as thing, is fine. But as soon as people put their faith in this machine, place all their hopes in this machine, are convinced that their spiritual life depends on this machine, and that actually this machine will be the vicarious instrument which will allow them cheaply to exercise love of neighbor, then at that moment we are in full idolatry...once a thing has been transformed into a divinity...we are ready to sacrifice persons to it.”

We become are anxious when we forget that Jesus is Lord of history. If we put our faith in our nation to save us we have reason to be anxious.

Max Lucado said this:

“We are really ready for this presidential election to be over. We’re ready for an end to the rancor and tackiness.

Voters on both sides feel frustrated, even embarrassed by it all. There is a visceral fear, an angst about the result. What if so and so wins? When we wake up to November 9, post-election, when the confetti is swept away and the election is finally over, what will we see?

I have a prediction. I know exactly what November 9 will bring. Another day of God’s perfect sovereignty.

He will still be in charge. His throne will still be occupied. He will still manage the affairs of the world. Never before has His providence depended on a king, president, or ruler. And it won’t on November 9, 2016.

“The LORD can control a king’s mind as he controls a river; he can direct it as he pleases” (Proverbs 21:1 NCV).

Now let me pose some challenging questions. Could Jesus, in his sovereignty, be allowing us to struggle so American Christians can see their idolatry and repent of it?

Could this horrible election season be part of his plan to remind us that our ultimate hope is in Jesus, and not in a political party?

Could Jesus actually be redeeming his church during this election by reminding us that we are never to put our hopes in even a great nation or party or candidate?

Could Jesus be using this embarrassing debacle to remind us that we are, after all, a pilgrim people, citizens of another kingdom, spiritual immigrants who don’t fully belong in this world?

To say, “Jesus is our hope” is not to say that it doesn’t matter who wins.

To say, “Jesus is our hope” is not to say that we shouldn’t vote or engage the political process in other ways. It is one of our great blessings to be able to vote. Throughout history the ability to select our leaders was for the most part unheard of.

What we are saying when we say “Jesus is our hope” is that we fundamentally and ultimately trust in Jesus alone to give our lives meaning, to protect us, to grant us safety and security.

But here let’s be certain to add one more qualifier.

When we say that we trust Jesus to make us safe and happy, we are talking about eternal, spiritual realities.

Jesus does not promise to prosper us financially.

Jesus does not promise that America will flourish forever.

He promises us the same thing he promises the believer in a North Korean prison camp or any number of other countries where followers of Christ are in great danger of persecution and even martyrdom – that we are loved, that our lives have meaning, that we belong to a spiritual family, that we are part of a bigger story that leads us to a glorious heavenly home.

So... in a few minutes you will turn on your phones and later your TV's and you will have instant access to millions of words about the state of this election, the country, our world.

When you do, remember one word.

Jesus – He is our hope.