

“... the Church desperately needs this book more than ever before.”

Dr. John M. Perkins, bestselling author and civil rights activist

EUGENE CHO

JERK
THOU SHALT NOT BE A
JERK

A CHRISTIAN'S GUIDE
TO ENGAGING POLITICS

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to Engaging Politics

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INTRODUCTION

POLITICS MATTER

Authors might feel compelled to invest their time writing a book for many different reasons. Some might be drawn by a particular excitement or passion, and others might feel a sense of burden. Both are important. As a pastor and leader trying to help guide churches, other leaders, and Christians in our current landscape, it's not excitement that motivates me to write this book. In fact, I never envisioned I would be writing a book about the intersection of faith and politics—especially one entitled *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk*. What a downer!

However, I feel *compelled* to write this book. In other words, I am burdened for the church and the aspect of discipleship and Christlikeness that often feels in short supply in our culture. I've even started the first chapters of many other books on more "safe" or "spiritual" topics, but I keep feeling *called* back to this book. I didn't major in political science in college. Nor am I a "politics junkie" or an expert on all things at the intersection of faith and politics. I've never run for public office or served on anyone's campaign; although, I unsuccessfully ran for middle school president (I can still picture the "Vote for

Cho” posters). I have much to learn and there are many other books you can read, which I’ll quote and recommend.

So, why write this book?

As I shared, I am deeply concerned and, at times, deeply grieved by the state of the political affairs in our society. Even as I write this book, I’m processing horrific recent news of pipe bombs mailed to political leaders, shootings at Jewish synagogues, a mass shooting at a mosque in New Zealand, and bomb explosions in churches and hotels in Sri Lanka. These terrorist attacks are indeed despicable and should be condemned by everyone. But we should not pretend this happened overnight. The unconscionable is *possible* when, over the years, we’ve normalized violent rhetoric, mocking, bullying, and the demonization of others. Clearly, we can’t blame it merely on the broad umbrella of politics, but it’s plain to many that something has significantly shifted in our culture and politics to our detriment.

Within the church, it’s all too convenient to blame the larger culture and society. I’m equally concerned by the manner in which Christians are engaging the political machine. For example, certain Christians have altogether dismissed and disengaged themselves from the political process—either because it’s too exhausting or because of the theological bent that shapes their conclusion that a follower of Jesus should only focus on “spiritual things.” Simultaneously, I’m concerned by Christians who appear to be overly obsessed by politics, and by this I mean we’ve chosen to justify everything we do for the sake of our political ideologies, views, or convictions. Additionally, I’m concerned by Christians who are heavily influenced by a vision of cultural Christianity and the power we can wield in our society without necessarily being about the ways and heart of Christ.

While many present various great challenges to Christianity, including secularism, I would submit that the greatest challenge is actually *within Christianity*: It's the temptation to build the structures and institutionalism of Christianity but without a parallel commitment to Jesus. It's politicians and even Christian pastors and leaders who sprinkle on a pinch of Jesus into our thinking, speeches, or sermons but often in a way that fulfills our agenda or goals. In other words, using Jesus to promote nationalism is simply not the way of Jesus. This is the danger of *cultural Christianity* that eventually, and predictably, produces cultural Christians rather than disciples of Jesus.

From a political perspective, cultural Christianity is when our theology is held captive by our politics rather than our politics being informed and even transformed by our theology. The danger of this predicament takes us back to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were tempted to be like, or even to be, God. In other words, the oldest sin in humanity has been to conform God into our image. So, as we read the Scriptures, if we're never offended, convicted, disrupted, or stirred by the Holy Spirit, it's quite possible that we've conformed Jesus into our thinking, liking, and ... image.

So, what are the dangers and implications of cultural Christianity? Imagine a Christianity that conforms to a culture—in all of its shifts and changes—and no longer adheres to the scandalous, radical love, grace, teachings, and life of Jesus Christ. Imagine an institutional Christianity that's obsessed with power, influence, and platform without a commitment to the countercultural commitment of Jesus Christ; a commitment to empire rather than the kingdom of God.

How else could we explain what transpired in Germany with the rise of Hitler and Nazism? In Germany, at the start of World War II,

some historians report that up to 94 percent of the nation were professing Christians.¹ How could there be such dissonance except to acknowledge the ills and poison of cultural Christianity? How else could we explain why so many would profess to be Christians and yet choose to become seduced by the evil propaganda of Hitler?

But it wasn't just merely an anomaly in Nazi Germany. We have witnessed this throughout history when Christian institutions go to bed with power and then embody practices that are antithetical to the gospel. This was evident when religious leaders used erroneous theology to dismiss and judge the poor in the book of Amos. This was evident when missionaries engaged in horrific practices of colonization and abuse of power with Native American boarding schools. What an incredible stain to the witness of Christ to the world.

During the summer of 2019, I was invited by World Relief to lead a small group of American pastors to travel to Rwanda for the purpose of listening and learning about truth telling, confession, forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation from Rwandan citizens, activists, and pastors. Why Rwanda? Tragically, the people and nation of Rwanda experienced what has often been referred to as the Rwandan Genocide, an unfathomable series of events in 1994 where for about a hundred days, approximately one million total Rwandans were killed, including more than 800,000 minority Tutsis at the hands of extremist Hutus. The reasons are complex. It involves decades of painful history, dehumanization, dangerous policies, and colonization at the hands of Belgium, but what's not complex is that Rwandans killed Rwandans. Family killed family. Neighbors killed neighbors. Even some husbands killed their Tutsi wives. Christians killed fellow Christians. What makes this tragedy even more incredulous is that during the time of the

genocide, both ethnic groups were predominantly Christian, “as over 90% of the Rwandan population claimed and still claims adherence to the Christian faith.”²

As I walked through the halls and exhibits of the Rwandan Genocide Memorial in Kigali (where it’s reported that about 250,000 victims were brought to be buried), I could only ask the question, “*How could this happen?*”

As hard as it is to believe (or don’t want to believe), many places of worship—churches and parishes of various sizes and denominations—were complicit in the evil of the genocide. Places like Ntarama Church, where more than 5,000 people were massacred by Hutu soldiers and militias. Indeed, many places of worship became “death traps.”³ During our time there, we had the privilege and burden of hearing from both victims and perpetrators, from citizens and government officials, and from Catholic and Protestant leaders and pastors. They gave us a stern warning about the dangers of placing any allegiance above our obedience to Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. In essence, the dangers of cultural Christianity.

They obviously wished that this had never taken place in their country’s (and church’s) history. And yet, they made it clear that they didn’t want to be known only by the horrors and evils of the genocide but that truth telling, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation could be possible. Through pain and tragedy, Rwanda has much to teach the rest of the world. They have much to teach American leaders. They have much to teach American pastors and the church. In a country where some often boast of our Christian roots and identity, the lesson again is that there’s a distinct and dangerous difference between cultural Christianity and following Jesus Christ.

We'll tackle these various tensions and temptations, but the heart of this book is to tend to fellow Christians who deeply care about our society, church, culture, and politics ... and who want to engage but don't quite know how to navigate this messy and chaotic space. Sound familiar? As a pastor, I've heard this countless times, "*I care. I want to care. I just don't know how to go about it.*"

You're not alone. I'm wrestling too. It feels jarring. So many of us are wondering how we can be faithful to Christ, remain engaged, and maintain our integrity. In other words, how can we continue to be Christlike in the chaos and craziness of our political climate?

In this endeavor, there are three realities to be mindful of as you engage this book:

1. This isn't a comprehensive book that covers global politics. It focuses mostly on North American Christians and American politics, and thus, while much of the content can be applied to global Christians, it will require some work of contextualizing what you read into your respective space. While I care about our larger global context, it's not realistic to write a book that covers such an expansive perspective.

2. I love books and I'll utilize many throughout this book, but several of the resources I cite are digital. In many ways, it speaks to both how information is being distributed and consumed and the pace in which events are occurring in our society.

3. And lastly, if this book is remotely pulling its weight, it should challenge and, at times, upset people from various political sides. For someone who wrestles with wanting to be liked by everybody and avoiding conflict, this is absolutely the worst possible book to write. As we all know, there are two topics that shouldn't be discussed: religion

and politics. Oh well. I'm certain that every single person who reads this book will disagree with something, if not many things ... and that's okay. While those who are firmly entrenched in their views, camps, and tribes may find little use for this book except to disagree with me, I'm hopeful there are many in between who might be both encouraged and challenged to more faithfully and deeply embody their faith in Jesus Christ.

It's not my intent to tell people who to vote for or how to vote on any specific issues—although, I'll certainly talk about some issues and why it's so critical for us to use prayerful discernment through the lens of Scripture and the life of Christ. The aim is not to be prescriptive on what or who to vote for but rather descriptive in our identity as followers of Christ. Even then, I suspect this book will solicit, as I shared earlier, many criticisms from the Left, the Right, and everyone in between. I've heard many of them already:

“You can't play both sides.”

“You're too cowardly.”

“You have no backbone.”

“You're being too political.”

“You're too privileged.”

“Why can't you just focus on Jesus?”

“What kind of pastor are you?”

To some, you're too conservative. To others, you're too liberal. To be a Christ follower is to be faithful amid tension. To stay engaged, to remain hopeful, to love anyway, to walk with integrity, and to bear witness to the love, mercy, and grace of Christ. This is becoming

increasingly difficult, but such is our call as followers of Jesus. It's not merely what we believe but also *how* we engage.

As you will read in the chapters ahead, I don't believe government in and of itself is a solution for all of society's ills. However, government plays a significant role, and how we engage in the process of governance is of critical importance. My hope is that this book is for all of us, whether we identify as red, blue, purple, or any other color of the political spectrum. You may be obsessed with politics, hanging on every maneuver, every strategic wrangling, completely bought into the game. You may be defending your favored party's positions steadfastly. You may be hopeful, believing that we finally have leaders who get it. You see that God is at work and our prayers have been answered with the leaders in place. Or you may be dismayed but optimistic, believing politics has value and better days are ahead. I am encouraged by the participation we see in politics today, not necessarily because of the political decisions themselves, but because so many Americans are rising to the occasion to vote.

For example, in the 2018 midyear election, almost half of all possible voters actually voted. More than 47 percent of people cast ballots in the 2018 midterms, the highest midterm turnout in more than 50 years.⁴

But maybe you didn't make it to the polls during the last election. You are ambivalent about politics but willing to engage if the right leaders with the right ideas ever come along. That's not an uncommon scenario, and we have different reasons for disengaging. If this describes you, I am sure you have your own unique reasons why. Maybe you've disengaged because you've come to the opinion that politics and government are evil. Diabolical. It's simply not the place for Christians

to be. You stay out of it to focus on things that are spiritual and holy, as this world is not our ultimate home.

Maybe you have become cynical and even exhausted. Perhaps you more strongly believed in the political process at some point, but no longer. You may see occasional value in political action and advocacy, but time and again you have seen that our political process is broken beyond repair. So you've decided instead to choose other battles in life and leave political fights for someone else.

I understand. I sometimes feel burned out. Disillusioned. Even deeply discouraged at times because of politics.

But I want to encourage you, believer. Take heart. There is a different way.

Hear this well: *Politics matter*. They matter because politics inform policies that ultimately impact people. When I read the Bible, it's emphatically clear that *people matter to God*—including and especially people who are marginalized, oppressed, forgotten, and on the fringes of our larger society. While some Christians have chosen to disengage from the political process, remain silent, or retreat to the sidelines, that kind of isolation or retreat from society is not endorsed by this book. I believe Christians ought to engage our larger culture—including the many facets and nuances of what we label “politics.”

On the other hand, we're living in a cultural context in which it appears and certainly feels as if politics have consumed our lives. Politics not only fill the airwaves of our 24-7 cable news culture but can inundate our daily lives—in conversations, marketplaces, dinner meals, and yes, even within our churches. Now, this isn't necessarily a

bad thing, but it *can* become toxic if not rooted in a strong biblical and theological foundation. Why? Because the idolatry of politics is eating away at the civic discourse of our nation. But it's not just in our nation; it's happening within the Christian community as well.

Since politics is a necessary process of any healthy society, this book is exactly that—a practical resource to help Christians navigate the chaotic and turbulent winds of political engagement, not as an end to itself, but as an expression of our discipleship as followers of Jesus Christ. In the chapters ahead, I urge believers not to go to bed with political parties and their powerful politicians. In doing so, we lose the prophetic ability to speak *truth* to power. As I've shared already and will continue to repeat, I'm not suggesting that Christians stand on the sidelines. But we shouldn't ever profess blind loyalty to a party. And by party, I mean *any* party.

This is much of what's happening today. Cultural “Christianity” has bowed to political loyalties. It's neither radical nor countercultural in the way of Jesus. Rather, it's a bastardized and infected form of cultural Christianity. Another word for what I just described is *idolatry*.

Consider the sharp rebuke from Thomas Merton for both progressives and conservatives alike:

I see little real substance in the noisy agitations of progressives who claim to be renewing the Church and who are either riding some rather silly bandwagon or caught up in factional rivalries. As for conservatives they are utterly depressing in their tenacious clinging to meaningless symbols of dead power. Their baroque inertia, their legalism. Disgust.⁵

Remember, as believers of Jesus Christ, we are to “seek first the kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33 NKJV) and not the kingdom of our party or respective country. And since this statement likely will elicit strong pushback and feelings, please note there’s a big difference between patriotism and nationalism. Go ahead, be patriotic. I am! I am an immigrant and a child of parents who were born in what is now called North Korea. When they were children, there was only one Korea before the devastating Korean War separated and divided both a nation and millions of families. We immigrated in 1977 when I was six years old. I am one of the millions of immigrants who made their way to the United States, and while my story might be unique, I’m a proud, naturalized American citizen who would be quick to share with others the important distinction between patriotism and nationalism.

Nationalism points to a potentially dangerous view of exceptionalism. For example (and for those who identify as Americans), the idea of American exceptionalism can be a dangerous guise for American supremacism. In other words, it functions purely through the lens of worldly power and will do anything to obtain or preserve that power. Now imagine the countercultural stories of Jesus Christ, who must be the central figure of our theology, worship, and life. For example, we must remember the story of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples—especially in a cultural context in which teachers of the law instructed Jewish people not to wash the feet of others because it was considered too menial and dirty. Jesus washing feet is truly radical. This is mind blowing and heart transforming.

We are inundated by politics, party, and power in these confusing times, but this is precisely why we must be about the kingdom of God. If you feel hazy about what the kingdom of God looks like, *look to Jesus*.

THOU SHALT NOT BE A JERK

He's not a domesticated puppet of our worldly power structures. The crucified and risen Christ is Lord and Savior. Indeed, we must keep looking to Jesus. Better yet, we must make sure we don't just admire Him from afar but actually worship and follow Jesus—His words, His teachings, and His ways.

CHAPTER 1

THOU SHALT NOT GO TO BED WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

It was late on a Tuesday night in November, long past the kids' bedtime, yet I could hear they were still up, playing in their rooms with friends. The adults were packed in our living room, with a bowl of popcorn and mostly devoured party food scattered across the carpet and sofa table. My friends can be slobs.

My wife and I, along with several other couples from church, were leaning into the blue light of the television like mosquitoes to a bug zapper. I glanced around the room at my wife and friends. Some people were standing, some sitting. A few guests were clutching their phones, heads down, refreshing for updates, then scrolling, scrolling, scrolling.

I found worried faces glued to the TV. One friend had her arms crossed, as if to deflect the pain of what political analysts had predicted. Our night had begun with jokes and laughter, but now, hours later, we were silent, with only the commentary of cable news pundits filling the

room. The electoral college tally was adding up. We saw the numbers on the bottom of the screen, and what those numbers showed was ominous. We started to imagine what life would be like if, heaven forbid, this man came into power as president.

Then, it happened.

A flashy graphic slid across the screen with a swoosh, accompanied by overly dramatic music. Then the news anchor made the big announcement, affirming as true what the political analysts said might be coming. It was a definitive statement, one that we had worried was remotely possible, but one we didn't dream would actually come to pass.

He had won.

He was becoming president.

The one we had feared.

What would become of our country?

How could this happen to us?

How would we endure life under a person who so clearly did not share our values, our Christian values? How had our prayers not been answered?

In the silence of the room, as we absorbed the weight of this news, it felt as if we were under attack. We were about to enter a dark period, four years of trial for Christians.

We had lost.

(Imagine more dramatic music here.)

NO ONE PARTY IS PERFECT

Does this story sound familiar? Or perhaps, a complete opposite version of the story would. Replace the emotions of fear and incredulity

with expressions of elated joy and thoughts of *Our prayers have been answered!*

This story might have real elements for me, but it's a fictional illustration. It's one I've heard before, and an idea I've used in sermons. It exposes something that is true for so many of us.

We pray, advocate, share on social media, and sometimes we hear sermons about Christian values and what they should mean to us in politics. And yet, our world and seemingly our very lives come crashing down when we see someone come to power who we believe is incompatible with our values. What you may have noticed in the illustration above is that I intentionally did not include the identity of the candidate who won, or the respective party.

Many readers of this book likely identify as Christians, but contrary to what you might have heard, Christians are not a homogeneous group that thinks alike on all matters, including the complex, nuanced world of politics. We possess diverse political views, just like non-Christians. Right or wrong, the way we choose to animate our faith in the world is unique to each of us. So when you heard the election night story, you probably imagined a particular politician or party affiliation as the winner of this nightmare scenario.

For some, this outcome could have happened in November 2016.

For others, November 2012.

Or maybe it was November 2008.

Or even November 2004, 2000, 1996, 1992 ...

And while I can't predict who, male or female, will win future elections for the presidency, I can guarantee that this story will play out again in 2020, 2024, 2028, and every future election until the day that Jesus returns to restore all things back unto Himself.

Many Christians are not only passionate about politics but are also involved in politics on some level. And yet, I would argue, at times, we are *played* by politics. At times, our identities and values become distorted, and our hopes misplaced.

Elections and politics are often, if not always, advertised as the most important subjects in human history that will forever change the course of the future and determine the fate of our lives, our children's lives, and the lives of our children's children. (*Cue more dramatic music.*)

Every election matters. It's naive to say otherwise, but no political commentator's election night announcement can beat the fact that we already have good news—the ultimate Good News. No candidate or party platform is more important than this. In the heat of a political moment, we tend to forget this truth. Confronted by the realities of unfairness and injustice, pain and atrocities, it's easy to forget. Faced with difficult and overwhelming theological questions, it's easy to forget. This is why we need to keep reminding ourselves the assurance of scriptures from the very lips of Jesus Himself:

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

Many Christians and non-Christians are at times behaving horribly in the ways they engage in our political discourse. If you want proof, you might find it by scrolling through your Facebook feed for five minutes. We accuse, vilify, and expect the worst from people who do not share our political mind-sets. Many of us have become alienated from family and friends because of this toxicity. Where does this

come from, except a belief that a certain political ideology is the most important thing in life? Even believing that a certain political ideology is “God’s way”? Don’t take the bait. No one party is perfect, and no one party monopolizes the kingdom of God.

FAITH IN CHRIST INFORMS MY VOTE

You might be reading this book and start speculating about my personal politics or leanings. I get it. After all, I’m writing a book about politics. As such, you might bluntly ask, “Eugene, are you a Republican or Democrat? Are you conservative or liberal?”

My answer?

Neither. Wait, what are we talking about? On what issue?

How can anyone possibly identify entirely and exclusively with one political affiliation? In essence, isn’t this the reality and danger of identity politics? Why have Christians and Evangelical Christianity subscribed to the temptation to even embed our identity with political parties? The beauty and power of the church are discovered not in the Left-versus-Right political spectrum but in the power of the gospel. We find our meaning and power in the person of Jesus Christ.

Rather than asking about one’s politics, we should be asking about our understanding, imagination, and embodiment of the beauty and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, the crux of our dilemma is that for some Christians, we’ve allowed our politics to inform our theology rather than our theology and worship of the Christ informing our politics.

Now, as for voting, I have voted both ways. And while the most accurate answer is that I am what political pundits call an independent

voter—even while I acknowledge the criticisms that independent votes receive in political discourse—I see good and danger on both sides and issues I strongly disagree with on both sides.

In truth, I have been on a journey ever since I became a Christ follower at eighteen years old and continue to discern because I still prayerfully wrestle with how my faith in Christ informs the way that I seek to live out the two great commandments of loving God and loving neighbor.

BUT REAL CHRISTIANS VOTE REPUBLICAN, RIGHT?

I had accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior the summer before my freshman year of college and joined a college ministry group shortly after I arrived at UC Davis. As I settled into my new world of Christianity-by-choice, I became connected with believers who cared deeply about the Scriptures, prayer, and following God's will and direction for their lives.

I was eighteen, so I could vote by then, and I grew curious about the impact of my newfound faith on many aspects of my life. In conversations with my friends and mentors, I had heard one thing regarding politics: *If you are a Christian, you vote Republican.* That was my understanding; there was no further elaboration expected, and I accepted it ... initially.

The first time I voted for a president was in 1992, casting a ballot for George H. W. Bush instead of Bill Clinton. My point isn't to share who I voted for but rather to express my memory of being unsettled about reflexively voting for a party—not only of conviction but also out of perceived Christian duty. As a new Christian, I began to ask questions

about this. Honestly, the response I received from my Christian friends can be summed up by these three words: *Don't ask questions.*

There was no room for discernment or discussion; it was just a sense that if you were a good Christian, you voted Republican.

As I look back now, I can see a danger in that thought process, in blind allegiance to one particular party, and in this case, the Republican Party. How could one party be in 100 percent alignment with the values espoused by Christ? How could any party?

Several years ago, I was speaking at a Christian leadership conference being held in Atlanta, Georgia. After the day's events, a group of pastors and leaders converged for a late-night meal and conversation. That's one of the best parts of going to these sorts of events—the candid and honest conversations behind the scenes. When our conversation turned to the topic of politics, a couple of ministry leaders shared with me that growing up in the South, they were ingrained from “the moment we were in our moms' tummies” that they were foremost a Christian, then an American, then a Southerner, and finally a Republican. In that order, and all were important to their identity. One of them even joked that in their family living room, right next to the large painting of blue-eyed, blond Jesus, was a picture of Ronald Reagan.

It's true. *Christians must vote Republican.* That's what I heard in my younger years, but ironically, I've now been hearing the exact opposite, particularly as I've resided in left-leaning, progressive Seattle since 1997. And it concerns me. Not because one can't vote Democrat, but both in the larger context and even in the younger demographic of many churches including my own, I hear a different, yet strikingly familiar, response to how Christians should engage politics: Christians, or at least real, “woke,” justice-minded Christians *must* vote Democratic.

Or, more specifically, it goes something like this, “*I’m not judging you, but how could you as a Christian vote Republican?*” (with serious eyeroll).

This may seem so strange for you if you live in America’s Bible Belt or in many other parts of the country. Perhaps it’s an oddity of living here in Seattle, where only 8 percent of the city voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election,¹ or perhaps it is because I know that so many younger people, millennials, and those in the emerging Gen Z crowd skew to the left politically.² But it’s surreal to me that I am now seeing the opposite of what I experienced as a new Christian in my youth—perhaps even with more intensity, judgment, and vitriol.

It’s an assumption or expectation in Seattle that if you are a Christian, you must vote Democratic, especially in the Trump era. Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not an apologist for President Trump, but I’ve been floored at how some left-leaning Christians have absolutely no room to consider why some of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, even with much reticence and anguish, would vote Republican. While I disagree much with Trump and have criticized him for many of his policies and bullying tactics, I can’t possibly heap a broad stroke of judgment on the 62,984,828 human beings who voted for him.

For some, there is no discussion, and if you think otherwise, you are not only wrong but also racist, sexist, misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic and we can’t be friends or be in any kind of relationship. And yes, I’ve been called all those things for simply suggesting that we ought to grant space for people to vote differently. It’s eerie because the term *fundamentalist* is generally used to describe unwavering attachment to irreducible Christian beliefs and is often tied to conservative Christian beliefs, but it’s apparent that fundamentalism can infect the ideological extremism on both political spectrums.

CHOOSING A DANGEROUS PATH

I fear that many of us have our favorite politicians and they have their political positions, and by and large, we seem to be comfortable with that arrangement without a ton of other critical thinking. We align with our candidates or our party. As such, sometimes the most passionately held beliefs among Christians may not be informed by our life-transforming faith in Christ, but instead originate from our chosen political party or political ideology. Subsequently, the ideology becomes part of our personal identity.

I am not saying we should not be involved in the political process. We should, and I also believe you can affiliate with a political party. I have numerous friends who have chosen to join campaigns, serve on staff, and even some who have chosen to run for political office at different levels. But I am concerned about blind allegiance, for those who blindly submit to a party's ideology. Many of us affirm it day after day, with the news we consume and with our relationships, which are often with people who think like us and align politically with us.

We can make cacophonous noise in our self-insulated choir, but if everyone is making the same noise, we may be deceived into thinking we're making harmonious music. It's quite telling that in our culture today, an increasing number of Christians are that much more prone to advertise and promote their political leanings and views than actually share their identities as Christians, let alone take intentional steps to actually share their faith with others through evangelism.

An aptly named *New York Times* opinion article, "You're Not Going to Change Your Mind," details research done for the University of London's *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. The study was conducted

during the incredibly contentious 2016 US presidential election, about the lengths we will go in our minds to believe what we want to, regardless of the facts.³

You may have heard about *confirmation bias*, which is the tendency to embrace information that supports our viewpoints. The antidote to confirmation bias is to intentionally expose ourselves to other viewpoints. Add in a chorus of diverse voices and perspectives and your mind will be opened.

But this study looked a bit further into our human nature regarding politics, delving into something called the *desirability bias*, by looking at the perspectives of people prior to the 2016 election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

The *New York Times* article explains:

Though there is a clear difference between what you believe and what you want to believe—a pessimist may expect the worst but hope for the best—when it comes to political beliefs, they are frequently aligned.

Here's how this is playing out. When people received desirable evidence—polls suggesting that their preferred candidate was going to win—they took note and incorporated the information into their subsequent belief about which candidate was most likely to win the election. In contrast, those people who received undesirable evidence *barely changed their belief* about which candidate was most likely to win.

Simply put, we want to think what we want to think. And no matter what someone from the other party says, they can do no right. If Trump cured cancer, I sincerely believe there are many on the left

who would not give him praise. This wouldn't be a huge problem because, of course, he would praise himself. (Ha ha, that's a joke. Don't hurt me.) But no doubt this would happen the other way as well. If President Obama cured cancer, some on the right would surely find reasons to criticize him.

Followers of Jesus should not be in bed with any of the political parties. Even if one affiliates with a particular party, may we maintain a posture to collaborate, listen, hold accountable, and engage the political system all while understanding that the political system is not our ultimate hope or answer. In addition, we must never lose the courage or conviction to speak prophetically to a group of people because we are lured by the power associated with politics, a leader, or a political party.

When Christians pledge blind allegiance to a political power and its leaders and cannot objectively evaluate what a politician states or espouses, we travel down a dangerous path. We cease to see the world informed first and foremost by the life and teachings of Christ. Instead, when we allow political allegiances to identify us, we distort the Bible to justify our politics and allegiances.

Put another way: this is *idolatry*.

Let's allow the Scriptures and our convictions about Christ and the kingdom of God to inform how we engage the candidates, the political parties, and the election process.

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS

When Jesus came to earth, He was clearly tough to argue with, as He had an otherworldly skill of seeing the hearts of others with clarity.

When Jesus was challenged about His authority, a scribe asked Him what commandment was the greatest.

He responded:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:30–31)

Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had called His disciples and performed miracles, healing the sick. Word spread, and the crowds found Jesus and began to follow Him, as did His disciples. Jesus went up on a mountainside to teach them a different way to think and live, through the Beatitudes.

There He said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of
righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you
and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of
me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward
in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the
prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:3–12)

As Christians, the totality of the Scriptures guides us, but these two lessons in particular by Jesus—the greatest commandments and the Beatitudes—help inform how we ought to engage our discipleship as followers of Christ as well as how we engage with others and how we engage with politics. As we study and heed the Scriptures, may we also carefully examine and follow the life, lessons, and example of Christ. This is how we set our moral compass. To love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. To live in the radical way Jesus taught us to live, as expressed through the Sermon on the Mount.

PROPHETS ARE NEVER POPULAR

In the long story of God, we see many examples of what happens when we become comfortable with a dangerous ideology to justify our views

and behavior. I think of the prophet Amos and his biting prophetic word for the upper-class people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, who were levying heavy taxes on the poor and taking bribes. They were not only rich, but they were the ones in authority as well. Amos wrestled with what he saw. It was a kingdom with peace and prosperity, but the wealthy were lazy, always in search of luxury and pleasure, and unconcerned about the poor.

You lie on beds adorned with ivory
and lounge on your couches.
You dine on choice lambs
and fattened calves.
You strum away on your harps like David
and improvise on musical instruments.
You drink wine by the bowlful
and use the finest lotions,
but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.
Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile;
your feasting and lounging will end.
(Amos 6:4–7)

And yet, these were God's chosen people. They were religious people, or in other words, church people. Just like us. They knew the songs, knew the Scriptures, offered sacrifices, but their lives did not reflect the heart of God.

It's poignant to consider how one can be religious and yet be distant from the person and character of Jesus. Another example of such dissonance is the story of Jesus at one of the Pharisees' homes in Luke 5:17–26. When word had spread that Jesus was going to be at this

home, teachers of the law from the entire region gathered ... only it wasn't with an open heart to learn and listen but rather to scrutinize and analyze. Imagine this: the Messiah they've awaited is in their midst. Literally, in the center of the room, and they can't believe and receive Him. As a pastor, I've learned that cultural Christians are sometimes the most difficult people to lead to Jesus.

Amos had had enough. Or rather, God had had enough. Through Amos, God told the Israelites that He despised their religious feasts and could not stand their assemblies.

Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!
(Amos 5:23–24)

Amos predicted that these people would be the first to go into exile. And about a generation later, the Assyrians conquered Israel, scattering the people. The prophecy came true.

If you are reading this and feel dismayed at those wealthy, abusive people, please be reminded that everybody loves to give prophetic words to other people with different views, but we never seem to receive them. We want to preach to others, but we don't preach to ourselves. We love to flip tables, but not our own. We love to expose the privilege in others while rarely considering our own. I confess, I don't like to hear words of rebuke.

The Israelites became comfortable with a mind-set that was based on their own comfort and desires, and if we're honest, we can easily do

the same. We can at least *attempt* to justify anything with Scripture. Additionally, in today's culture, we can always find some authority, leader, author, blogger, or expert who will affirm our views, but how much more valuable is it for us to first ground ourselves in Christ and His ways? We must see the greatest commandments of loving God and loving our neighbors as what directs the trajectory of our lives, informing all of our decisions. Otherwise, we will be at the mercy of building our lives and ideology on something as ever-changing as shifting sand.

Want proof? Here is a glimpse of the examples of shifting politics.

WHAT DO WE STAND FOR?

For as long as there have been politics, political alliances and platforms have been fluid. Even before the turn of the millennium, Donald Trump was exploring a presidential bid. He told NBC News in 1999 about his stance on abortion if he were president: "I hate the concept of abortion," he said, but he was "very pro-choice,"⁴ responding to a question about whether he would ban partial-birth abortion. As President Trump, he said, "I will always defend the first right in our Declaration of Independence, the right to life," a right he said extended to "unborn children."⁵

Of course, President Trump is not the first politician to have changed his mind—or to have been publicly awkward about where he stands on an issue. In modern politics, Senator John Kerry was asked about his support for a supplemental military-funding bill in 2003, and was infamously quoted as saying, "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it."⁶ The nuance was that he voted for a version of the bill that paid for military funding by reversing some of

President Bush's tax cuts, before voting against the bill as proposed, though he voted a year earlier to use military force. Convoluted? A lot of folks didn't easily follow the thought process at the time either.

And if you're forty years old or older, you'll remember President Clinton trying to quell accusations about sexual impropriety, saying unequivocally to a phalanx of TV cameras, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky."⁷ Though it was a firmly delivered statement, it was quickly shown to be a lie, and once the scandal unraveled, he was impeached.

These are just a few sad gems in an ever-growing list of politicians who either are not entirely truthful or at the very least are conflicted about where they stand. To me, it is understandable that personal views can evolve in time, through life experiences and maturity. We have to leave space for politicians (and ourselves) in that evolution. I want to be careful about painting a broad stroke of all politicians, but sometimes politicians simply get caught in a lie and then change their answers to whatever tickles the ears and flutters the hearts of their base supporters.

Individual politicians have their challenges, and entire political parties do too, about matters of enormous significance.

THE DEMOCRATIC SHIFTING TIDE OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Today, it's safe to say that the Democratic Party is home to African Americans by a wide margin, with 90 percent voting for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election.⁸ But that wasn't always the case. In the 1968 presidential election, the party struggled to come to a consensus for a candidate, as southern Democrats were pulling for

Governor George Wallace, a segregationist, instead of Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who eventually claimed the party nomination but lost to Richard Nixon in the general election.⁹

Another example of the shifting tide of political ideology also comes from the same generation of Democrats. It was during the Vietnam War, one of the most difficult and divisive periods of the United States.

Scholar and writer Michael Nelson has documented the changing political tides through the past few decades. He wrote that beginning with Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, Democrats were comfortable promoting the “animating premise of Democratic liberalism, that the federal government has the ability to solve virtually any problem it chooses to take on, domestic or foreign.”¹⁰

John F. Kennedy’s escalation of US involvement in Vietnam was consistent with that philosophy. When Lyndon Johnson succeeded Kennedy after his assassination rocked the country, Kennedy’s policies persisted. LBJ, more comfortable with domestic affairs, relied on Kennedy’s foreign policy advisers, continued the escalation, and was elected in his own right in 1964.

But by the time the 1968 spring primaries began, Johnson faced growing opposition within the party from Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy and withdrew from the race. After Robert Kennedy was assassinated in June of that year, Vice President Hubert Humphrey sealed the nomination without ever winning a primary.

Nelson wrote that “Humphrey wanted to move his party’s platform in a slightly dovish direction to placate Kennedy and McCarthy supporters, but he backed off when Johnson told him that doing so would ‘endanger American troops,’ that he ‘would have their blood on my hands.’”¹¹

Consequently, the Democratic platform ended up being more hawkish on Vietnam than the Republicans', which at least called for a "de-Americanization" of the war. Thus, through the party dancing to find the right position, the Dems found themselves out of step, the party against war being more militant. Though Humphrey ultimately pledged to end US bombing of North Vietnam, it was too little too late, and he lost narrowly to Richard Nixon.

CHRISTIAN VALUES AND EVANGELICAL INFLUENCERS

One of the great mysteries of American politics since 2016 has been the support of Donald Trump by evangelicals, particularly the white evangelical community. People, religious and otherwise, attributed their rejection of Hillary Clinton to her support of abortion and LGBTQ issues.

Okay, that sort of gets us through the day after the 2016 election. Barely. But I find it puzzling that some evangelical leaders unequivocally lined up behind Trump.

Do you remember William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, a treasury of great moral stories? With examples from literature and history, it teaches values like honesty, compassion, and responsibility—and it was a favorite in conservative Christian homes twenty-five years ago.

You might also remember the *Focus on the Family* radio program, so popular in evangelical Christian homes in the '80s and '90s. Over the airwaves and in his books, Dr. James Dobson talked about commitment to your spouse, consistent love and discipline for children, and how to sort through the tough moments of life with God's help and moral grounding.

I'm not suggesting that these are perfect examples of Christian faith, but I'd like to position these works with this question: How could American evangelicals move from being all about morality to now supporting a president who flaunts his own sin in the face of all we've been taught to be right and decent? He is a thrice-married former casino owner who bragged to a TV host that he could kiss women at will because he was a star, adding the infamous line about grabbing a woman inappropriately: "You can do anything."¹² To justify his actions by saying he's not a pastor is dangerous and problematic, because it gives license to any Christian who is not a member of the clergy to do whatever he or she wants without consequence.

How can the evangelical community still strongly endorse the president who has said many disparaging, racially incendiary things about many groups, including Mexican immigrants (many of them families) and proclaimed in his first speech as a candidate: "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."¹³

No person has lived a blameless life, me included. No politician has either. But objectively speaking, we should acknowledge that President Trump is night and day different from the kind of moral leader that conservative Christians have always sought.

Michael Gerson, a Wheaton College graduate and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, bemoaned the trend of evangelicals in politics in a rich and nuanced article for the *Atlantic*. It traces the roots of evangelicalism and its history of political involvement on behalf of the oppressed, particularly as abolitionists, to today.

"It is the story of how an influential and culturally confident religious movement became a marginalized and anxious minority

seeking political protection under the wing of a man such as Trump, the least traditionally Christian figure—in temperament, behavior, and evident belief—to assume the presidency in living memory,” Gerson wrote.

He continued:

The moral convictions of many evangelical leaders have become a function of their partisan identification. This is not mere gullibility; it is utter corruption. Blinded by political tribalism and hatred for their political opponents, these leaders can’t see how they are undermining the causes to which they once dedicated their lives. Little remains of a distinctly Christian public witness.¹⁴

This disconnect is nowhere more evident than in the willing, eager, and stunning about-face from Rev. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, and one like it from Dr. James Dobson, who once lambasted President Bill Clinton for his own dalliances with women and the truth. On August 27, 1998, a week after Clinton had more or less confessed his affair with Monica Lewinsky following months of denials, Graham published a column in the *Wall Street Journal* in which he blasted Clinton’s morality, his penchant for lying about his morality, and the president’s insistence that none of it mattered.

“Much of America seems to have succumbed to the notion that what a person does in private has little bearing on his public actions or job performance, even if he is the President of the United States,” Graham wrote.

Graham specifically rejected Clinton's claim that his actions were a private matter between him, his wife and daughter, and God.

But the God of the Bible says that what one does in private does matter. Mr. Clinton's months-long extramarital sexual behavior in the Oval Office now concerns him and the rest of the world, not just his immediate family. If he will lie to or mislead his wife and daughter, those with whom he is most intimate, what will prevent him from doing the same to the American public? Private conduct does have public consequences.

And Clinton's acknowledgment to that point was not enough for Graham.

The president did not have an "inappropriate relationship" with Monica Lewinsky—he committed adultery. He didn't "mislead" his wife and us—he lied. Acknowledgment must be coupled with genuine remorse. A repentant spirit that says, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I won't do it again. I ask for your forgiveness," would go a long way toward personal and national healing.¹⁵

Frankly, it's hard to argue with that rationale. Clinton's initial reactions to accusations regarding Lewinsky had been defiant. He did, however, offer a far more repentant *mea culpa* at the September 12,

1998, National Prayer Breakfast, where he told a roomful of clergy, “It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine: first, and most important, my family; also my friends, my staff, my Cabinet, Monica Lewinsky and her family, and the American people. I have asked all for their forgiveness.”

A cynic, or just an honest recount, would have to add that Clinton’s tearful confession came just hours before the release of the painfully detailed report by Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr, which forever changed our thoughts about cigars and a blue dress from the Gap.

Two decades later, and well into Graham’s public support of Trump, even his attitude toward Clinton had magically softened. He told Eliza Griswold, a writer for the *New Yorker*, “Well, you take American Presidents in the past. Bill Clinton wasn’t the first man to have an affair in the White House. We’re all flawed, and the Bible says we’re all sinners. And the Bible tells us that God sent his son to take our sins, to die for our sins.”¹⁶

He’s called Trump “a changed person,” referred to his affairs as “alleged” even after the payoff to porn star Stormy Daniels by Trump attorney Michael Cohen was established as fact. And Graham accepted from Trump the same tailored acknowledgment he had once rejected in Clinton: “Trump has admitted his faults and has apologized to his wife and his daughter [he didn’t clarify which daughter] for things he has done and said. And he has to stand before God for those things.”¹⁷

Dobson’s reversal is just as striking. Just days after Graham’s 1998 *Wall Street Journal* column appeared, Dobson wrote a letter to his followers in which he went into great detail about Clinton’s sexual foibles, his lies, and his visit to Russia as a young man.

How did our beloved nation find itself in this sorry mess? I believe it began not with the Lewinsky affair, but many years earlier. There was plenty of evidence during the first Presidential election that Bill Clinton had a moral problem. His affair with Gennifer Flowers, which he now admits to having lied about, was rationalized by the American people. He lied about dodging the draft, and then concocted an incredulous explanation that changed his story. He visited the Soviet Union and other hostile countries during the Vietnam War, claiming that he was only an “observer.”¹⁸

Yet during the 2016 presidential campaign, Dobson was emphatic—more so than Graham—in his support for Trump, who he famously described as a “baby Christian.”

If anything, this man is a baby Christian who doesn't have a clue about how believers think, talk and act. All I can tell you is that we have only two choices, Hillary or Donald. Hillary scares me to death. And, if Christians stay home because he isn't a better candidate, Hillary will run the world for perhaps eight years. The very thought of that haunts my nights and days.¹⁹

Evangelicals have followed their leaders, and I'm not just talking about leaders like Trump. They follow leaders like Graham and

Dobson, who have guided the faithful to Trump. These two men and other vocal mouthpieces of evangelicalism directly steer Christians toward political conclusions. But let me ask, what would these men have said about Trump twenty or thirty years ago if he were running as a Democrat?

We should be circumspect in all evangelical leaders who dole out political advice. I'll include myself in that statement. I am not perfect, so measure anything in this book with the Scriptures. Let the Word and the life and teachings of Christ be our source of guidance and inspiration.

WE HAVE NO POLITICAL HOME

Our home is not in a political party; our home is in Christ and this new way of living. But does that mean we ignore politics? Clearly no, as politics impact people—and we are called to love our neighbors.

Michael Wear is the author of the book *Reclaiming Hope: Lessons Learned in the Obama White House about the Future of Faith in America*. Wear directed faith outreach for President Obama's 2012 reelection and eventually became one of the youngest White House staffers in modern American history. I actually met Wear through the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. They hosted the annual Easter prayer breakfast for a group of about 120 Christian faith leaders from very diverse backgrounds. Even as a staffer for the 44th president of the United States, Wear had this important word to say about the danger of finding our home in politics:

Politics is causing great spiritual harm and a big reason for that is people are going to politics to have their inner needs met. Politics does a poor job of meeting inner needs, but politicians will suggest they can do it if it will get them votes. The state of our politics is a reflection of the state of our souls.²⁰

Christian historian and author Diana Butler Bass wrote that in AD 410, Rome—a seemingly Christian city—fell to a barbarian invader, getting hit with the worst possible news. Rome was the home of the early church, and Christians there were petrified that this could happen.

“Christians had forgotten that they were citizens of two cities, the one Augustine called ‘the City of Man’ and ‘the City of God.’” They conflated the two into one, fully identifying Roman interests with Jesus’ way.

She continued:

Although Rome had accommodated the faith for a time, Augustine believed that Rome was the “City of Man,” whose way of life ultimately was founded upon self-love, domination, possessions and glory. Augustine contrasted that way to the Christian way expressed in the “City of God,” the pilgrimage community that loves God, seeks wisdom, and practices charity and hospitality. “In truth,” Augustine wrote, “these two cities are entangled together in this world. Sometimes the City of Man honors the City of God and its virtues, other times not. For those who follow

Christ, their true home is God's city—always purer and more beautiful than any earthly one."²¹

To be a faithful Christian is to embrace tension. The mistake some Christians make is to think we could actually find a home, especially in politics.²²

When people have this mind-set, it perpetuates the idea that there is exclusively one way to engage in politics in order to be a faithful Christian. And with such a narrow ideology, we can fall into a situation where we stop thinking, stop engaging, and stop asking important questions.

It becomes my camp versus your camp, in or out, for or against, friend or foe, ally or enemy. We write off people who identify with the other party, for whatever reason, and often those reasons are the ones spread by our chosen media sources.

Jesus died and extended grace for the Left, the Right, and everyone in between. So, even as we seek to speak truth to power, we must stop vilifying and demonizing those we disagree with.

It is impossible to have one party that fully encapsulates what it means to be about the kingdom of God. It doesn't exist. The kingdom of God cannot be encapsulated by one gender, one church, one denomination, one leader, and certainly not by one political party—even if there are prominent Christian leaders advocating for it.

WHAT'S ON YOUR HEART AND MIND?

1. How do you respond when someone asks what political party you subscribe to?

2. How much does your faith guide your political choices? Do you research the issues yourself, or do you rely on Christian leaders to inform you?

3. Think of three political issues that are important to you personally. How much research have you done in order to be fully informed about them?

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