

Four Issues to Consider Before You Support Trump

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What is Truly at Stake in 2016

I don't usually address politics, but there is a deeper issue at stake this year which we must wrestle with because we care first about the church and secondly about the nation. My heart is broken over it and I want to invite you into my grief for the sake of the church and the gospel. This is an unusually long article, but I believe the critical nature of the hour demands careful thought and reflection.

The 2016 election has exposed fault lines in the nation and in the church in a way that no other election in recent history has. In the midst of all the confusion and rhetoric it is time for the church to find her voice and rediscover her identity as a people who find their ultimate hope in another kingdom and another King and represent the values of that King in the public square.

For the church to recover her calling, we are going to have to break free of certain political bonds that have held us for quite some time. If the evangelical church does not wrestle through her current entanglement with politics then I fear the church will lose her ability to be a prophetic voice to the culture and the government on a wider sphere. It's becoming clear that the phenomenon of "Donald Trump" might just be what will force that issue in this election.

To become the prophetic voice the church is intended to be will cost us far more than we think. It is going to be more painful than we think to abandon the nation's fixation on political solutions. We are used to political friendships, and we are used to a measure of respect from the system as a compliant and loyal voting bloc. There is something far bigger than politics at stake. I believe the church's prophetic voice is at stake.

Many Christians in pain over who to vote for, being faced with two undesirable options. The issue of who a person privately votes for depends on a number of factors and I do not want to address the issue of who to vote for nor all the factors that come into play in that decision. I want to look at something larger which is the public witness of the church in the nation.

One way to examine that witness is to examine what the church's public posture should be towards a man who is the antithesis of biblical values but is simultaneously calling for the support of evangelicals and thanking evangelicals for their support

(which is also a subtle campaigning trick to woo undecided evangelicals). While most evangelicals are uncomfortable with Trump, he has gained support among some segments of the evangelical church so we need to examine carefully what this means for the future of the church. It is something very serious when the rulers who represent the spirit of this age call on the church to mobilize on their behalf. Trump himself is not the real issue, but his campaign is exposing an issue we need to deal with.

The nation now more than ever needs a church who is not caught up in our nation's own desperate search for a political savior. We desperately need the prophetic lens of men like Isaiah and Jeremiah who were able to bring God's perspective in the middle of national crisis. With that in mind, let's address four key issues related to Trump to see how they relate to the church and its voice in the nation.

Some Things Are Wrong and Unsupportable

Each election inevitably ends up with a conversation about the "lesser of two evils" and, due to America's two party system, a conversation about how not voting for a certain candidate is in fact a vote for another "more evil" candidate. While that logic seems reasonable and has merit in some cases, there reaches a point where the argument breaks under the weight of the fact that some things are simply wrong. Trump provides an opportunity for us to wrestle with this reality.

Many Christians use abortion as a litmus test, for good reason, but the fact that a candidate may be better on abortion does not then mean we overlook everything else a candidate stands for. The church is called to define righteousness for the culture and when we promote men who are the exact opposite of the biblical standard for righteousness, the church loses its prophetic voice. Randy Alcorn says it best when he reflects on Trump's rise in fame and asks, "Do character, morality, and kindness still matter?"¹ Even Trump recognizes his values are not evangelical.²

Trump has repeatedly made disparaging, and racist remarks towards minorities. His narrative on illegal immigration is replete with race baiting as he identifies Hispanic immigrants predominantly as rapist, criminals, and killers.³ He attacked a judge born in America simply because of his ethnicity.⁴ His posture towards other racial minorities is equally disturbing. His election rhetoric has been concerning enough, but his

¹ <http://www.epm.org/blog/2016/Mar/21/donald-trump-character>

² <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/21/why-evangelicals-worship-trump.html>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/>

⁴ <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/05/donald-trump-university-judge-gonzalo-curiel-223684>

business history seems to reveal years of outright prejudice against African-Americans.⁵

The white ranks of the evangelical church have traditionally shied away from racial issues, but as long as the church cannot find its voice on these kinds of issues we are revealing the shallowness of our gospel. Abortion and marriage are critical issues, but these other issues are serious as well and the Bible repeatedly addresses social issues. This is an area where the white evangelical church is behind the times, and now is the time to begin to recover ground lost on this issue. It is a gospel issue.⁶

Trump has openly bragged about his adulterous affairs and sexual conquests. No other Presidential candidate has ever been such a bold proponent of adultery. He has been so base as to suggest that his daughter is fit to pose for Playboy and that if he was not her father he would be dating her.⁷ He recently described sexual desire towards his daughter⁸, and he's even asked others if they thought she was "hot."⁹ When his second daughter was a year old, he was already making comments about her body.¹⁰ He was the first to put a strip club in a casino.¹¹ He ridiculed a female candidate in the primary as too ugly to vote for.¹² His overall attitude towards women is highly sexual, misogynistic, and deplorable.

He openly evaluates women according to their bodies and has repeatedly expressed willingness to sleep with other women including married women.¹³ When asked if he would leave his current wife if she were involved in an accident, Trump's response was that it depended on what happened to her breasts.¹⁴ Trump may have promoted a few women in his business, but he did that because he thought men were better, but

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/opinion/sunday/is-donald-trump-a-racist.html>

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/opinion/a-white-church-no-more.html>

⁷ http://www.today.com/id/11714379/ns/today-today_entertainment/t/trump-jokes-hed-date-daughter/#.V5Zq8le99Ec

⁸ Trump said, "Yeah, she's really something, and what a beauty, that one. If I weren't happily married and, ya know, her father . . .",

<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/trump-seriously-20150909>

⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/us/politics/donald-trump-women.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-baby-daughter-comment-2016-4>

¹¹ <http://afa.net/the-stand/election/2016/02/will-evangelicals-put-an-unrepentant-serial-adulterer-in-the-white-house/>

¹² <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/trump-seriously-20150909?page=13>

¹³

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/06/apprentice_crew_members_on_their_old_boss_donald_trump.html

¹⁴ <http://www.gq.com/story/melania-trump-gq-interview>

a good woman would work harder than a man.¹⁵ Employees have recounted how he wanted the most attractive women in the business to surround him and even told one of his highest ranking female employees that “she liked her candy” when she gained some weight.¹⁶

He has mocked the disabled.¹⁷ He ridiculed a disabled veteran because he was captured and Trump likes those “who aren’t captured.”¹⁸ At the same time, Trump managed to avoid being drafted for military service and has boasted that, due to his promiscuity, avoiding STD’s was his own “personal Vietnam.”¹⁹ His attitude towards human rights is deplorable and he openly admits to supporting torture and other inhumane acts.²⁰ This is just the tip of the iceberg. A simple look at Trump’s media reveals a disdain for both decency and virtually everything Christians would call biblical values.

Some have tried to overlook Trump’s character on call for support on the basis of issues, but what makes this argument for Trump so strange is how recent and fluid all of his convictions are. He believes that Planned Parenthood does some good things and essentially advocates for the status quo regarding their funding.²¹ Until he began his campaign, Trump was very complimentary about Hillary’s leadership. He and his family have made donations to their campaigns and foundations and he even made the boast that he had bought them off.²² Trump has boasted that his sister, who is a judge and radically pro-abortion would make a phenomenal Supreme Court judge.²³ (Those supporting Trump on the basis of the Supreme Court would do well to remember that Trump said he wouldn’t be limited to the list of conservative judges he

¹⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/05/ivanka-versus-the-donald/483542/>

¹⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/us/politics/donald-trump-women.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2015/11/26/donald-trump-mocks-reporter-with-disability-berman-sot-ac.cnn>

¹⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/us/politics/trump-belittles-mccains-war-record.html?_r=0

¹⁹ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/02/16/draft-dodger-trump-said-sleeping-around-was-my-personal-vietnam.html>

²⁰ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/06/politics/donald-trump-torture/index.html>

²¹ <https://www.conservativereview.com/commentary/2016/02/fact-check-trump-supports-planned-parenthood>

²² <http://time.com/3962799/donald-trump-hillary-clinton/>,
https://www.buzzfeed.com/andrewkaczynski/trump-hearts-hillary?utm_term=.cnzvv31XG#.emY33WevJ

²³ <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/423196/trump-praises-his-sister-pro-abortion-extremist-judge-ramesh-ponnuru>

proposed.²⁴) Social conservatives also tend to forget that Trump made his fortune off of businesses like casinos. Many of the issues Trump is championing now are very recent conversions.

A simple look at Trump's campaign and his public life over the last few decades makes it readily apparent that he is bold in his sin. By simply looking at how the Bible describes a foolish leader, we can easily see that Trump is the embodiment of nearly every description the Bible gives of a foolish leader.²⁵ Trump's campaign, which reflects the philosophy of his books, has been filled with arrogance, intimidation, threatening, name-calling, and bullying. Trump is a proponent of deception in his books. (This is without taking into account the image of Trump in his books is largely fabricated and that the reality is far more troubling.²⁶)

Some people are attracted to this thinking that it is what it takes to fix things forgetting that the same people who celebrate his bullying now may very well become victims of it in the future. Many supporting Trump have criticized Obama's use of the Executive Order, but Trump's entire campaign resembles an executive order. He speaks like a dictator because Trump's platform is not ideology - he is his own platform.²⁷ Christians who argue that sometimes it takes a personality like Trumps to "tell it like it is" or "get things done" should remember that in the Bible, every time the Lord uses someone like Trump to "fix" a nation it is a judgment on that nation.

Just twenty years ago, evangelical leaders were calling for the resignation of Bill Clinton because an alleged secret affair making the claim that Clinton was no longer fit for office because of his indiscretion. Now we have evangelical leaders campaigning for a man that openly brags of far more. We cannot be a voice to the culture with this kind of hypocrisy. We have to ask why so many Christians argued adultery qualified Clinton to be removed from the Presidency but does not affect Trump's qualification. The answer may be uncomfortable, but it the question must be asked - could it be that we condemned Clinton because he was a Democrat and we are willing to overlook Trump's sins because he is a Republican?

Some may argue that we must promote Trump for the sake of the Supreme Court, but are a few Supreme Court judges worth our integrity? Would the ancient prophets have held back their rebukes to get a few political appointments or would they have considered that selling out - equal to selling a birthright for a pot of soup? Are we willing to trade our integrity by publicly supporting a man who promotes wickedness

²⁴ <http://www.newsmax.com/politics/donald-trump-supreme-court-justices/2016/05/18/id/729543/>

²⁵ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-recognize-a-foolish-leader>

²⁶ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/donald-trumps-ghostwriter-tells-all>

²⁷ <http://www.weeklystandard.com/without-exceptionalism/article/2001806>

in the hope he will appoint “better” judges? (We also do well to remember that Trump changes positions rapidly and there are no guarantees on who Trump will actually appoint.) To apply a conservative phrase from the 1990’s - if Donald’s wife cannot trust him neither can we.

Some will raise the issue of abortion and its seriousness. From heaven’s perspective the bloodshed of abortion is extremely serious. Abortion has shed much more blood than Islamic terrorism. Abortion is serious but it does not mean that we promote wickedness in order to get a supposedly “pro-life” candidate who realistically will not change the status quo? Should we promote *anyone* regardless of their character if they promised they were not pro-choice anymore?

Some will say that God can use anyone and frequently uses people we wouldn’t expect him to use, including wicked rulers. That is true and the Bible repeatedly describes God’s unusual orchestration of history. However, there are two key points we have to remember. The first is that over many decades these kinds of statements tend to be applied more to candidates of a certain party. If God is going to use someone we least expect, why does that automatically mean Trump? Why could it not also mean that the Lord wants to use Clinton? We need a much more robust view of God’s sovereignty that extends beyond the one political party.

Many who argue that God may want to use someone who offends us, like Trump, have refused to give the current President that same consideration. If God is sovereign, perhaps he has also been using the current President for His purposes. It is theologically inconsistent for us to provide a rationale for the Republican candidate that is unrighteous while not giving the same consideration to other candidates.

The second key point to remember is that just because God uses wicked men does not mean we are to agree with them. It is one thing to say that the sovereign God uses wicked men to accomplish His purposes in the earth. It is another thing altogether to say that therefore we should endorse and support wicked men. We are called to raise a standard for righteousness and reject wickedness. If the Lord chooses to use a wicked man for His purposes then He will, but the Bible never calls us to anticipate it and campaign for it. The prophet Samuel knew Saul would be king, but also warned the people about him.

Trump has also already become famous for changing his position even in the middle of an interview. Trump’s opinions and convictions change so quickly that seasoned political analysts are shocked he has survived as a candidate. That tells us there is something more than political issues driving Trumps’ support. Trump’s platform is not issue driven, it is personality driven. That is why he thinks he is the only one can fix the system and why his positions change so rapidly.

It is why he said he could “stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose voters”²⁸ – a statement that sounds like a third world dictator or fascist leader not a democratically elected President. Ironically, at the same time he’s so insecure he believes we need to strengthen libel laws so newspapers cannot criticize him (also a tendency of third world dictators).²⁹ In a sense, Trump supporters are not voting primarily for issues, they are voting for a man who presents himself as the solution to all problems. In his arrogance Trump believes, “I alone can fix the system.”³⁰

Yes, it is true that we never get the candidates we want and that there are virtually no candidates at all who are righteous. People are also very complex. Leaders who appear to be “good” can often have serious hidden sins and tolerate wickedness in their secret lives. Likewise, rulers who appear to be wicked can still show kindness and virtue in certain contexts. No doubt individual stories of Trump’s graciousness or kindness will emerge.

Recognizing this, some evangelical leaders have pointed out that we do not elect a national pastor, but a president. There is no perfect candidate, but there has to be a point at which we refuse to endorse wickedness – especially when it is presented in a Christian package. Some will argue Hillary is no better, but that is not the point. At some point we must refuse to endorse and publicly support candidates who promote wickedness regardless of party. Most evangelicals recognize the issues with Clinton’s platform and character and are now being asked to endorse Trump in spite of his character. However, the gospel compels us to be a witness for Jesus, not oppose a certain political party at any cost. Valid questions about Hillary’s character can certainly be raised, but that does not mean we, as a church, promote a different candidate who also refuses to embrace the gospel.

Our Gospel Witness is at Stake

Trump is arrogant about his sin, which leads us to the next issue. The conversation about Trump is a much bigger conversation than the issues because Trump has claimed to be a Christian. We are told in Scripture to judge a tree by its fruit (Matthew 7:16; Luke 6:44) not by its rhetoric and based on Trump’s fruit he does not show signs of being a true follower of Jesus. The apostle Paul tells us how to deal with such man in 1 Corinthians 5. Paul plainly states how we are to deal with someone who says they are Christians, but boldly lives in an opposite way:

²⁸ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/23/politics/donald-trump-shoot-somebody-support/index.html>

²⁹ <http://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2016/02/donald-trump-libel-laws-219866>

³⁰ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/07/21/donald-trump-republican-convention-acceptance-speech/87385658/>

¹¹But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. (1 Corinthians 5:11 ESV)

It appears Trump embraces nearly every vice Paul mentions in this verse. Earlier in the chapter, Paul passionately tells the Corinthians what to do with this kind of man:

²And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you..⁵you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 5:2, 5 ESV)

Because Trump has claimed to be a Christian and yet lives a lifestyle that is the exact opposite, we are commanded by Scripture to not associate with such a man, and certainly not endorse or promote him. *According to Scripture we have a responsibility to give a witness to Trump about the condition of his soul by refusing to associate with him.* I am not talking about being mean spirited, but I am talking about refusing relationship with a man who claims to be a Christian in order to make a statement to him about the condition of his soul and the danger he is in before God.

We have a weighty responsibility before God. We are called, because we care about all men, to not affirm them in their wickedness. Have we considered that we put Trump's own soul at risk when we befriend him and promote him? Can we weep when Christian leaders mention the role of Jesus or Christianity in Trump's life? Have we considered how serious a matter it is to affirm a lost man in his sin? How can we pretend that he is one of us? Christians deep down know that Trump is not a true believer and yet we fail to follow Paul's clear instruction on what to do with such a man. Why do our hearts not break when Trump publically speaks of the great support he has received from evangelicals? Yes, some of it is a campaign tactic, but tragically it is also partly true.

We would do well to remember the warning God gave to Ezekiel:

¹⁸If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. (Ezekiel 3:18 ESV)

When wicked men come to us claiming to be Christians and seek our support and affirmation, is it not possible that we are doing exactly what Ezekiel 3:18 warns against when we publically affirm them? As a church have we considered our responsibility before God when we publicly affirm men as Christian whose fruit speaks the exactly opposite? The vast majority of our politicians are not true Christians and that does not mean we cannot privately vote for them, but it means we cannot endorse them

whether explicitly or implicitly when they claim to be Christians and then promote them among Christians.

The church also has to beware of election conversions. There is already a narrative forming that Trump has prayed a prayer and could be a "baby Christian." I have no doubt that Trump would pray a prayer if he thought it would give him support on the campaign trail, however Jesus was clear that we are to evaluate men by their fruit. Until there is a genuine, public brokenness backed up by a radical change in demeanor, a commitment to repair past wrongs, and real fruit to demonstrate the truth of the commitment we should ignore any claims of an election conversion. That is one of many political tricks that have been repeatedly used on the church. It is time for our gullibility to stop.

We have to be honest and ask if we sometimes are so enamored with powerful men that we want some proof that they are Christians even when their behavior is the exact opposite so that we can enjoy access to their power. We need to ask if we have been guilty of encouraging election conversions so that we can soothe our own souls and support a candidate without the inner conflict over the issue that the candidate's character is truly deficient. Affirming these sorts of false conversions cheapens the gospel and affirms candidates in their lost condition.

Men of power are quick to see through these games and our gospel looks cheap and flimsy to them - more of a social club with a ritual prayer as the price of entry than a radical new birth that comes from true repentance. They are quick to say prayers for votes because they see it as meaningless and how can it not be meaningless when we treat cheap prayers a "true conversion?" Nothing presently indicates Trump is a Christian, "baby" or otherwise. If fruits of repentance emerge over a long period of time when an election is not at stake, then we can joyfully welcome him into the family.

Because Trump has claimed to be a Christian the gospel is at stake in whether we implicitly affirm that statement by promoting him. Had he not claimed to be a Christian, it would simply be a matter of issues and character (and on that basis alone Christians leaders should not promote such a man), but it is more than that. It is an issue of the gospel and whether we are willing to be obedient to Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 5 for the sake of Trump's own soul and the sake of the gospel witness in our society.

When we act like a man like Trump is within the bounds of what is considered Christian then we have lost our gospel witness. Are we willing to pollute the gospel for a little bit of political influence or to defeat another candidate? Many will recognize the hypocrisy while others will rightly think that if Trump's behavior is included in what it means to be Christian then they do not want any part of it.

Jane Eisner has already pointed this out in her editorial, "Sorry, Evangelicals, You Can't Play the Trump Card and the God Card at Same Time":

I am struggling to understand this. The evangelicals I know – and yes, this nice Jewish girl knows and respects some devout Christian evangelicals – are people whose faith informs their behavior, their politics, their very being...they seek to conduct themselves as Christian in the best sense of that word: with probity and kindness, empathy and love...

...white evangelicals seem to bypass faith values to support a thrice-married man who boasts about his sexual exploits, made a fortune from gambling, supported abortion rights and gay and lesbian rights not too long ago, struggles to quote a single verse from the Bible and clearly doesn't believe in a judgmental God or the Golden Rule.

But it doesn't matter! As Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church, in Dallas, and a Fox News personality, said at a forum in March: "I couldn't care less about the president's tone or his language... I want the meanest, toughest, son-of-a-you-know-what I can find in that role, and I think that's where many evangelicals are. The leaders just don't get it."

Ah, but now I do. Here's the corollary, though: If character and behavior don't matter to you and your candidates, they shouldn't matter in judging me, or people like me.

*This year's embrace of Trump robs white evangelicals of any justification for judging others' behavior, for legislating against us, for preaching about family values and the necessity of maintaining religious tradition. If they want to be unabashedly pragmatic voters who don't walk the walk, fine. But they've lost the moral high ground. **I don't know what their gospel looks like anymore** [emphasis mine].³¹*

Listen to that final phrase one more time – "I don't know what their gospel looks like anymore." That is a completely reasonable statement for an unbeliever to make when she sees the church endorsing the antithesis of our stated values. Here's my question – regardless of how some feel about the other candidate is it worth it to us to confuse the gospel? Is preventing a Clinton presidency worth leaving Jane and a nation without a clear witness of the value and truth of the gospel?

³¹ http://forward.com/opinion/345668/sorry-evangelicals-you-cant-play-the-trump-card-and-the-god-card-at-same-ti/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Main

Some will say that all have sinned and that no one is perfect. That is true. We are all deeply guilty before God and in need of mercy. We are also called to extend mercy towards each other. However, when a man is bold in his sin it is very different from someone who has failed and yet is repentant or at least is struggling against their sin. Trump is the opposite. He has said that he has never felt the need to ask for forgiveness because he and God have a great relationship and he doesn't do much that is bad.³² This is a man who is brazen in his sin. He is not a broken man who has come short. He is not even trying to hide his sin because he does not even feel the shame of it. *As Christians we need the fear of God on this because it is costing our society a true witness of the gospel and costing Trump a personal witness of his own true condition.*

Evangelical support of Trump gives society every reason to name us as hypocrites. *When a man like Trump claims to be a Christian, for the sake of the gospel we have to refuse to go along with it.* The church is meant to be God's tool to release light into a dark culture. Have we truly considered what an awful thing it is that we are saying to Trump and the nation that his behavior is within the bounds of a follower of Jesus? Some will say that Clinton is no better, but again that misses the point. Trump is not the main point. The point is the church's witness in society and how endorsing certain kinds of candidates affects that.

There's a Bigger Question about Christianity and American Politics at Stake

Every four years it seems like most Christians in America fall prey to the nation's hunt for its next Messiah. This year seems to be following a similar pattern. The church sadly has become caught up in the rhetoric that our entire future is at stake in who the next President in America is. Again, this is out of sync with the gospel. We are called to pray for righteous leaders, and have the immense privilege of voting, but we ultimately belong to another kingdom. Though we love America and want the best for it, we recognize our hope goes beyond national politics.

Despite his wickedness, many Christians are being asked to promote Trump's with the argument that we must do anything possible to prevent a Clinton presidency. However, I want to say I do not believe a Clinton presidency is not the biggest thing at stake in this election. The biggest thing at stake in this election is the church's prophetic voice to the culture. The church's role in the national discourse is at stake and that is far more important than who the next president is. *Trading our voice in culture in an attempt to prevent a Clinton presidency should be a horrific thought to us.*

³² <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-on-god-i-dont-like-to-have-to-ask-for-forgiveness-2016-1>, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/18/politics/trump-has-never-sought-forgiveness/index.html>

If the church breaks her slavish ties to the political system, and recovers her prophetic voice in the culture, that would be far more valuable than avoiding a Clinton presidency at any cost. What if Trump is elected, but we lose our prophetic voice in the process by campaigning for a wicked man? *Why aren't we in more pain over this than over the next President? Have we become more American - or dare I say Republican - than Christian?*

Where is the outcry and weeping in the Christian community when a pastor stands at a major political event and declares that Trump believes in Jesus and goes on to say that our enemy is Hillary Clinton and the Democratic party?³³ Paul was far more gracious to a wicked ruler who claimed to be god and reminded first century Christians that, even when the government was oppressing them, that our wrestle is not with human beings but with powers and authorities in heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12). Could it be that the church in America is failing to truly challenge the powers and authorities in heavenly places because we have traded our calling to challenge the true powers of darkness for a political battle?

Sadly this is precisely what has happened in the last 2 election cycles. In each election the church so set its hope on a candidate that when that candidate did not win, the church adopted a position of war with the President rather than a position of prayer (1 Timothy 2:1-3). I am not saying that there should not be genuine grief over certain policies, but at the same time God is sovereign and we should inquire of Him what He is doing in the nation in every season.

Obama's presidency may well be exposing the fact that we put more hope and confidence in our political leaders than we do in God's leadership. If we really believe that there is a higher King than every earthly King, and a higher court than the Supreme Court, and that heaven responds to a praying church then it is quite possible that Obama's presidency has been a great gift to the church in America. There is far more prayer happening in the church in America right now than there was 8-10 years ago and I seriously doubt that church in America would be as provoked to intercession if one of our favorite candidates had been elected to the White House.

If we valued prayer as much as we say we do, we would thank God for provoking his church to prayer rather than continuing to lull it to sleep. What if a Clinton presidency causes intercession in the church to increase? If we truly believe in the power of prayer as the spark for national awakening it's quite possible that could be a much greater gift to the church than another president who will not contribute in any way to spiritual vitality in the church.

³³ <http://beforeitsnews.com/opinion-liberal/2016/07/video-gop-convention-prayer-our-enemy-is-hillary-clinton-and-the-democratic-party-2532980.html>

If the church does not recover her prophetic voice to the culture in this election, I fear it could be completely lost in this nation. Trump launched his general campaign with as much or more Christian rhetoric than any other recent Republican candidate in recent history by putting a number of ministers on stage at the convention. We need to recognize this for what it is. A man who does not embrace the gospel is seeking the loyalty of the church and we should be asking if it is a divine test.

When Judah put her hope in human kings, God gave Judah kings who were increasingly inferior. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah warned the people not to put their hope in these kings. The great tragedy is that the nation clung to political saviors all the way to exile in Babylon. I believe ancient Israel illustrates a principle: when God's people put their hope in political saviors God will give us more and more inferior leaders until he breaks our ungodly association with political saviors.

Reflecting on Trump's shocking support from evangelical figures, Steve Mitchell believes he has found the answer based on polling they conducted almost 30 years ago. Mitchell did an analysis of the most dedicated evangelical voters to discover what moved them and had the following conclusion:

We found that evangelicals are drawn toward politics by messianic figures. Although Trump may not be Christ-like, the term messianic does have other synonyms such as "liberator" or "defender," words that Trump supporters might easily use to describe him.

...we found out what did draw this group toward politics: strong, decisive leaders, not issues. They got involved in politics for the same reason they got involved with their church -- because they were looking for someone to help "show them the way." Evangelicals were drawn into politics by messianic leaders.³⁴

Though he is not a believer, Mitchell's analysis should still trouble us. The church was confronted with this in 2012 when the Republican candidate was a member of a cult tried to present himself as a Christian. Some evangelical leaders began campaigning for him at the same time awkwardly trying to overlook the fact that the man was a part of a cult. This time we are faced with a man who is also claiming to be a Christian and who is more bold and brash about wickedness than the last candidate. We need to recognize what is happening. The Lord is forcing the issue by presenting us with worse and worse leaders to expose where our true loyalties lie so the church can rediscover her voice. If we continue to promote a political platform at all costs, we may

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http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/03/06/why_evangelicals_support_trump_p_129864.html

find that the Lord gives us over to a blindness for a season and we lose our voice in the culture.

Jeremiah warns us of prophesying peace and prosperity to the wicked, but this is precisely what we do when we do not speak honestly to a candidate like Trump nor speak honestly in the national discourse regarding what is true.

¹⁶Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.' "
(Jeremiah 23:16-17 ESV)

It is time for the church to find her voice again. It is humiliating that the church bows to a man who is the opposite of everything we stand for because we have fallen prey to a political narrative that motivates us by fear. If we were truly free and truly found our hope and citizenship in heaven, then we would not be so fearful and easily manipulated by the threat that if we work for one candidate then another candidate will be elected. Beloved, our hope is not affected in the least by a Clinton presidency. Perhaps the God who so often brings nations to repentance in the most unusual ways might do precisely that through a Clinton presidency. We have to stop being driven by fear. It is one thing to recognize some of the serious issues with Clinton's policies. It is another thing to allow a fear of Clinton's presidency to cause the church to be silent on other issues.

The Politico, a secular publication, gave a profoundly prophetic view of what has become of the evangelical voice in culture:

"Though it's common to talk about the Republican Party having been captured by white evangelical activists, if you really look at the way the two groups have interacted over the years, it's more accurate to say that evangelicals have been captured by the Republican Party...Born-again Christians continue to laud Jesus as their King of Kings. But it is a strange sovereign who is so slavishly responsive to his subjects. Here Jesus is more pawn than king, pushed around in a game of political chess, sacrificed here to take down Obamacare and there to turn a reality-television star into God's gift to America.

"The Trump candidacy is no outlier. He has not hypnotized evangelicals into forgetting the foundations of their faith. He is simply revealing the fact that their faith is now more political than theological. The white evangelicals who flock to his rallies like their parents once did to Billy Graham revivals know that he lives a life comically at odds with teachings of the Bible and the examples of the

saints.³⁵

Robert Cunningham, a pastor, gives an even more insightful critique:

Now consider Donald Trump. In one sense he makes no sense. From a character and even policy standpoint, evangelical support of Donald Trump is utterly mystifying, and countless articles are being written trying to explain this phenomenon. But all of them seem to come to the same conclusion: evangelical support for Donald Trump is a referendum on the current state of evangelical doctrine and convictions. I think these explanations are missing the point...I think we aren't giving the convictions of evangelicals enough credit. They know enough to know what Trump is saying and doing is wrong, and yet they are still supporting him.

Why? Because we are never compelled by our ideals like we are by our loves. And when you look at Donald Trump through the shared loves of the evangelical Culture, he starts to make perfect sense.

Evangelicals don't believe in Donald Trump as much as they love Donald Trump and all that Donald Trump represents. Watch these rallies and you will quickly see they have nothing to do with inspiring ideas and hopeful policies; they're worship services. And standing on the stage before the great throng of longing souls is the manifestation of their common love feeding their hungry hearts with his nonsense.

Russell Moore closes his op-ed with a plea to evangelicals: "We ought to listen, to get past the boisterous confidence and the television lights and the waving arms and hear just whose speech we're applauding." But what if the boisterous confidence and the television lights and the waving arms are precisely what evangelicals have been trained to love? What if they can't listen because they are enraptured? What if they applaud, not because Trump has given them a speech, but because Trump has given them what they love?³⁶

Are we willing to consider Cunningham's point? As Augustine proposed, we are more driven by our loves than our beliefs. With this in mind the fact that evangelicals can cheer Trump and be moved emotionally by his speeches should lead us to deep introspection of who and what we have become. Is it possible that Trump is a mirror and that he appeals to us because he reflects certain heart issues? Now is not the time for the church to become embroiled in political fervor. It is a time for thoughtful examination of what we truly love. It is the time for repentance and not campaigning.

³⁵ <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/03/the-huge-cultural-shift-thats-helping-trump-win-evangelicals-213729?o=0>

³⁶ <http://tcpca.org/2016/03/17/in-love-with-donald-trump/>

Perhaps the Lord wants to use Trump to break our obsession with worldly power. If we are willing to embark on that painful journey than the disaster of this election cycle could produce great fruit in the church regardless of who becomes president.

All the hysteria calling us to avoid a Clinton presidency at all costs is drowning out a critical conversation for the church in this hour. If we are willing to hear it and consider it, Trump is exposing things in us. Over decades we have slowly developed a blindness that has caused us to be political puppets drawn to human saviors. If we have the courage to break the fog now, we could see the church become a truly prophetic voice in our nation. To do that, we must get past all the fear driven rhetoric that tries to silence a prophetic church with the threat of a Clinton presidency. If Clinton becomes president and, in the process, the church recovers her prophetic voice, it will be an incredible victory for the church.

Perhaps we are too addicted to the semblance of political power, but affinity for political power always disqualified prophets. The reality is the evangelical vote is not nearly as powerful and influential as we think - which is precisely why it is manipulated far more than we realize. There is a reason the Trump campaign's primary appeal to the church is "avoid Hillary." There is a reason so many Christian voters are uneasy with Trump deep down. Whether they are conscious of it or not, Trump and his campaigners are simply revealing that the emperor has no clothes. Again, Clinton's campaign does not offer any hope to Christians either. Perhaps the Lord wants to expose the fact that there is no political solution in the nation. This is precisely why the witness of the church - the witness of the true solution - is so important.

We Must Understand the Season of a Nation

Finally, we must briefly consider what season our nation is in. Nations go through cycles and, as nations intensify in their embrace of darkness, the Lord begins to humble those nations. Seasons of humbling are intended to cause a nation to reflect on what true greatness is, but nations rarely do that. They tend to intensify their wickedness until they are discarded on the ash heap of history.

When we survey the biblical prophets, whether it is Jeremiah or Habakkuk, we find that God frequently takes credit for troubling a nation in order to produce repentance and humility. He does this through a nation's own leaders as well as external pressures. The story of Israel gives us a vivid example of this and, while America is not Israel, Israel's story gives us a pattern for how God deals with nations.

With this in mind, we need to reflect on America's season. Isaiah and Jeremiah both prophesied essentially the same message to Judah, but in very different seasons. In Isaiah's time God continued to give the nation protection over her enemies. In Jeremiah's time God began to humble the nation, but the nation had become so used

to God's protection that they supported worse and worse leaders confident that God only intended blessing for them.

One of the things that President Obama is being most criticized for is the way he has postured America among the nations of the earth. During President Obama's administration there has been a notable shift in foreign relations and diplomacy. The shift has been away from the United States as the dominant player in every arena more towards a member of the international community that is not necessarily superior in every conversation.

The President's enemies have accused him of weakening the nation, not supporting "American Exceptionalism" and generally not enforcing the nation's greatness. In a way we could say that Obama has humbled America in the sight of the nations. In all the angst over the President's foreign policy I have yet to hear the church asking the question, what if it is the Lord, and not the President, who is beginning to humble the nation?

Particularly in election years we tend to forget that God claims sovereignty over nations. He uses unrighteous rulers, and He frequently does things that we would not agree with. Before we vent our anger at the President perhaps we should, as a church, inquire of the Lord. What if we are in a generation where He wants to humble the nation? What if this is not the time when He wants the church to be driven by a vision of America's greatness as defined by power and economics? What if He is the one fundamentally arranging the nations in our generation? We all agree the Bible predicts that He will. Is it possible He has already begun?

The reason this matters is that Trump's rally cry is "Make America Great Again."³⁷ That phrase has deeply and emotionally resonated with a some voters. Because it is an emotional slogan and because it has so captured the emotions of many evangelical voters we must ask is that slogan in line with the season the nation is in. To say it another way, if we are in a generation when the Lord is humbling the nation, then Trump's rally cry is essentially a rejection of what the Lord is doing in our nation. Trump is not defining greatness as goodness. He is describing it as power, might, and economics. If the Lord is humbling those things in our nation so that we will consider our ways, rallying behind that phrase is rejecting the Lord's purposes in our generation. Perhaps the church should instead be calling the nation to true greatness.

What if we are entering into a season where God's plan in the nations is going to reshuffle the global powers? Are we willing, as Americans, to thoughtfully and prayerfully consider the generation we are living in and what God is doing in the nation. Are we willing to have our own power and property affected so that His purposes can advance? Are we willing to consider who we are as a people and why

³⁷ Incidentally, this is a phrase taken from Ronald Regan's 1980 campaign.

our nation is being troubled or will we immediately join a call to pride, arrogance, and strength? When God begins to humble a nation and that nation resists humbling, God gives the nation more and more inferior leaders, which is precisely what is happening in this election on both sides. Perhaps we need as a church to seek the Lord rather than grasping at one of those inferior choices.

Because this campaign slogan has such emotional power with some voters (though many other voters are wondering exactly what moment of greatness we are hoping to recover), we simply have to ask whether that emotional response is the emotional response the Lord has to the condition of our nation. It is very serious that we are not even considering this. If we do not slow down and inquire of the Lord, we may find we are like the people of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day. As the Lord began to humble the nation and Jeremiah implored the people to cooperate with God's process to minimize the damage for the nation, the nation committed itself to "make Judah great again." Increasingly inferior kings tried to flex their might and ultimately created an even more disastrous situation for the nation.

The great tragedy in Judah's fall was that her religious leaders led the charge for Judah to flex her muscle and recover her greatness. They assured the political leaders that God was for them and that God endorsed their plan for political and economic power. In reality, God was troubling the nation to invite them to repentance. This is yet another reason why public Christian prayers for Trump and Christian endorsements are so deeply troubling. What if Trump's entire platform is actually in opposition to the season the nation is in? What if we are in effect repeating the error of the religious leaders in Jeremiah's day and assuring a man, and his supporters, that the Lord supports his agenda when in fact it is entirely the opposite? This is another reason why we must be liberated from fear-based rhetoric regarding a Clinton presidency in order to ask thoughtful, biblical questions so that we can lead the church and have a real voice to the nation. If the Lord is humbling the nation, Trump represents something entirely different - pride, arrogance, and tolerance of sin. (And sadly, Clinton does not offer us anything better.)

Right now either party can list a number of "enemies" threatening the status quo in America. However, we have to at least consider that our biggest issue may not be our "enemies." It may be God Himself. Perhaps He is the one putting pressure on the nation for His purposes. As the people of God we must consider this because, if it is true, only the church can give the nation the answer to that kind of crisis.

The Church is the Biggest Issue in this Election

In the election cycle, like most others, I hear a lot of grief over the condition of the nation but little grief over the condition of the church. I propose in the midst of the election that we shift our primary focus to the condition of the church. Both candidates are morally compromised. Both parties are breaking down. If we step outside the

political fervor, we may just hear God's voice inviting us to recover the church's voice in the culture by once again setting our hope on the one true Messiah.

The fact that we are still swayed by these false messiahs indicates that we desperately need preaching on the glory and majesty of our King. When Jesus is declared in His beauty and in His glory, then we are neither awed by imposters like Trump nor fearful of leaders like Clinton. We have lost our way politically because Jesus has not been set before us as the glorious king that He is.

In the absence of a focus on the beauty of Jesus, the "lessor of two evils" and "anyone but Hillary" arguments have created a context where most of American Christianity is being fearfully motivated to remain essentially subservient to one party's politics. Now is the time for the church to break free of every political machine in order to become a prophetic voice to the nation.

The Lord is using increasing inferior candidates to expose our condition and to break the cycle of devotion to human solutions. Evangelical support for Trump would have been unimaginable a few years ago, and we have to ask what is happening that has caused so many of us to so easily discard our values. Not only do we discard our values we willingly promote a man whose campaign has been divisive, belligerent, racist, and misogynist. Some are surprised that there is so much division in the church in this election, but if we embrace a man we will reap even more division.

As a church we are seemingly neutered of our prophetic voice and not only are we silent on these issues, we have gone so far as to ignore the fact that Trump campaigns like a tyrant. The real crisis is that the church has not yet awoken to the great hypocrisy of it all - campaigning against some candidates on the basis of morality but overlooking morality in others.

As a church we have put too little value on our call to be a prophetic witness to the nation. We have allowed the siren call of political saviors to obscure our higher calling to function in society as a voice with a single allegiance. For too long we have had competing allegiances that have not been in their proper place, and any time the church gives allegiance where it should not be given the Lord will make it uncomfortable and awkward until He forces us to break it off. He did it with Israel and he will do it with us.

The only way to truly see a storm is to get above it and outside it. Then you can give true wisdom on how to navigate it. Until we get out of the political storm, we are not going to be able to speak true wisdom to the nation and its politicians.

We enjoy the awesome privilege of voting, a privilege the vast majority of humanity has never had and something the biblical authors could never imagine. We should engage in every area of society, including politics, but we should look to Daniel as our example. Daniel was an influence in government and politics but he never put his

hope in it and was therefore able to be a prophetic voice. He never confused Babylon with Zion and that's why Daniel was just as able to serve as easily under Babylon as under Persia. We should be equally able to be a prophetic voice to the Republicans and to the Democrats. Becoming the slave of either for the sake of a little political influence will cause us to abdicate our higher calling to be a true light in a dark culture.

This election in particular I am concerned that the church may never recover our prophetic voice if we do not create a real break with the party politics. Whenever a party (Republican or Democrat) uses religious rhetoric and religious figures to state that Jesus essentially endorses their candidates and policies, we should be both alarmed and grieved. We are quick to criticize the compromised Christianity of the Roman Empire, but sometimes seem quick to try to recreate it every four years.

There's never been a better time to liberate the gospel from its political cage. This is the time to see evangelicals refuse to submit to fear and instead courageously call Trump and Clinton both out in the areas of ungodliness that they promote. The nation desperately needs a prophetic voice and the church is called to be that voice. The unbelievers in the nation know that the evangelical world has a lot at stake in being a truly prophetic voice to every candidate campaign and when we are silent they conclude that we have been bought and sold. Now could be our finest hour. Do we have the courage to do it?

Some may object to the focus on Trump, but Trump is not the issue he simple reveals the issue. Clinton has very serious policy and character issues as well but has not drawn evangelical endorsements. If evangelicals endorse a Democratic candidate who also adopts a Christian persona while living in the opposite way, we must be just as strong in our criticism of that ungodly embrace. It is only when we recognize that there is no political answer that we will truly feel the full nature of our situation as a nation.

A Trump presidency as a result of a complicit church could be much worse for the position of the church in the nation than a Clinton presidency as a result of the church boldly stepping into its prophetic voice. If the post-election analysis shows that the evangelical church sticking to biblical principles is what cost Trump the presidency that will tell me that we are recovering our voice. Politics is a game of pragmatism, but we are people of principle. Let's stand on those principles without partiality.

We sometimes act as though the Lord's sovereignty over nations ended with the invention of democracy, but He remains sovereign. We are faced with two unqualified candidates because the Lord wants to break our search for a political savior. Neither are fit for office so rather than justifying one option lets acknowledge the gravity of our situation and seek the Lord for what He is saying in the nation and what He wants to do in the church.

In our rush to decide who to vote for let's slow down and what a serious time it is in our nation. We must also remember that in a democracy presidents and other leaders primarily reflect the culture rather than set it. The candidates themselves are not our biggest issue, they serve to illustrate to us how desperately we need an awakening in the nation. Presidential candidates are in large part mirrors in which we see a reflection of who we are as a nation.

We must learn from history. When a nation is in crisis, people are far too often willing to acquiesce to a nationalistic narrative that sets the stage for oppression. We cannot be fooled into supporting campaign rhetoric designed to appeal to evangelicals. Any man who sets himself up as the savior, threatens others, ridicules the vulnerable, and even threatens freedom of the press will not suddenly become a Christian in office. Perhaps Trump will become President, but a Trump presidency will ultimately be a judgment on America. As others have said the fact that Clinton and Trump are the two nominees for the nation is already an indicator of God's judgment. That itself reflects just how serious our situation is.

If there is not a significant shift in the posture of evangelicals towards endorsing Trump, it is going to ultimately hurt us very badly - whether Trump wins or loses. It just may set back our gospel witness a generation. Many believers are in pain over who they are going to vote for, but we must also be very aware of the power of our public endorsements and support for ungodly candidates. We are in uncharted waters. No matter who is elected there are reasons for deep grief over the condition of the nation. One embraces one kind of darkness and other a different. In the question of who to vote for, let's wrestle with these larger issues. All are serious. However, I have great hope that God will use this national crisis to mature His church.

Let's pray that is not the case and the Lord makes the entire church a prophetic witness.

Additional Resources:

Amy Gannett has written an excellent article from a millennial point of view on how Trump support could affect evangelicalism in the future.

"How Evangelicals are Losing an Entire Generation"

<http://amygannett.com/2016/07/29/why-evangelicals-are-losing-an-entire-generation/>

Russell Moore has published a number of pieces that offer a concise, compelling reason why the church must take a stand in this election.

"Should Christians Always Vote for the Lesser of Two Evils"

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/march-web-only/should-christians-vote-for-lesser-of-two-evils.html>

"Donald Trump is not the Moral Leader we Need"

<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/430119/russell-moore-trump-symposium>

"Have Evangelicals who Support Trump Lost Their Values"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/have-evangelicals-who-support-trump-lost-their-values.html>

John Piper reminds us that the best way to vote is to "Vote as Though Not Voting"

<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/let-christians-vote-as-though-they-were-not-voting>

Doug Wilson on "7 Reasons Why a Trump Administration May be a Good Thing"

<https://dougwils.com/s7-engaging-the-culture/7-reasons-trump-administration-might-good-thing.html>