

## A Christian Appeal to Trump Supporters

“For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” 1 Peter 4:17

There are many sincere Christians who support Donald Trump for the President of the United States. I believe they do so because of the Republican pro-life platform and his pledge to appoint conservative judges who he hopes will overturn legislation sanctioning abortion and gay marriage. Among these Christians there are many who agree with Trump’s immigration policies, his border wall, his position on guns, and his America first foreign policy. They resonate with Trump’s bold approach to foreign powers, including our allies, and his strong-armed tactics on international trade. They agree with Trump that America has been pushed around by China. They accept his view that we have been intimidated by our trading partners and that we pay too much for NATO, the WHO and the UN.

They like the fact that he has slashed foreign aid to countries, because these needy countries probably didn’t appreciate our generosity anyway. They agree with Trump’s substantial increase in military spending and his opposition to climate change. They support his roll back of environmental policies on clean air, car emissions, and oil drilling. They accept his conclusion that globalization has hurt America and they want manufacturing jobs brought back home. They like the fact that he has slashed regulations across the board.

Many Christians also like Trump’s bold rejection of the Washington establishment. Trump is not like any other politician. He’s not afraid to put down the progressive liberal elite, in fact he relishes every opportunity to identify and belittle his enemies. Previous administrations have seen foreign powers like Russia and China as America’s main enemies, but Trump has flipped the script and made his primary enemies the Democrats, the news media, the liberal intelligentsia, and the Federal government’s bloated bureaucracy. He has taken control of the State Department and Justice Department replacing key figures with those who are loyal to him. These are some of the reasons why many sincere Christians find Trump, in spite of himself, a compelling and attractive President. Trump’s character, including his lies, misogyny, sexual immorality, boorish bullying, and narcissism, are ignored for the greater good of the conservative political agenda.

When I list the reasons why Christians support Trump I admit I feel some sympathy for my brothers and sisters in Christ who see Trump as the only violable candidate that they can vote for. They embrace his rejection of the liberal pro-choice, gay-marriage, globalization agenda and they simply put up with his personal moral character. It is the price to be paid for his pro-America, pro-morality, pro-family, pro-business agenda. Let the president rant and rage on tweets and bully and demean anyone who crosses him. Sincere believers can live with that because they have the big picture in mind.

## The Big Picture

Sincere Christians who support Trump tend to see America as an exceptional nation, set apart among the nations for the sake of the world – the new Israel. This concept of America first is as old as the seventeenth century Puritans fleeing English persecution. They came to the new world the way the Israelites entered the promised land. The Exodus myth replayed in the birth of a nation under a generic deity extolled in “God bless America” and “In God we trust.” The deistic notion of god espoused by the Founding Fathers cut out the Passover’s sacrificial lamb from the Exodus story and left us with a political allegory. Salvation history was transposed into American history without Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Freedom movements from Latin American Liberation Theology to Martin Luther King, Jr. have embraced this political allegory as their own. The Exodus became co-opted as a great story of liberation without the rest of the narrative that climaxed with an empty tomb and eternal redemption.

Ironically, many white Christians who resonate with Trump’s “Make America Great Again” want to go back to the stability and prosperity of the post-World War II generation and the popularity of nominal Christianity, whereas many black and white Christians look on that era as racially oppressive and spiritually naive. American Christendom unwittingly presided over racism and materialism and the “moral order” of suburban Christianity was a cover for moral complacency and the compromising status quo. Religion thrived as a private affair of the heart without interfering with social justice and Jesus’ kingdom ethic. Many white Christians believed that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Communist sympathizer and radical agitator. Christianity became co-opted by capitalistic greed, individualistic self-interest, and the politics of white privilege.

The legacy of Christendom continues to shape the political imagination of many sincere Christians who have trouble letting go of their “God and Country” vision of America. Instead of embracing the New Testament experience of being “resident aliens” and “citizens of heaven” they still look to politics to preserve their Christian morality. Donald Trump is their last, best hope to preserve the Christendom morality of the past. It is painful for them to admit that they live in a post-Christian era. They cannot accept the moral relativism and pluralism that belong to our secular age. America can no longer live up to their moral vision of a Christian nation. Even conservative judges on the Supreme Court will not overturn precedent setting laws that enshrine individual rights at the expense of biblical morality. Many sincere Christians support Donald Trump out of fear that they are losing their country, but I’m afraid they will eventually come to realize that Trump played them for his own political advantage and that he caused serious harm to the witness of Christ’s followers.

The big picture of our cultural situation today should cause Christians to reconsider their place in culture and in the world. America today is like first century Rome and the followers of Jesus Christ ought to be encouraged to make the most of their “chosen exile” status. They are strangers in their home culture, missionaries in a familiar but foreign land. Now is not the time for Christians to bemoan the loss of religious clout and resent the power and influence of our secular age. The god of American civil religion is dead and the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the only God who lives. There is no generic deity around which we can gather as a nation and pay our respects, but eventually every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

## The New Testament Model

Believers are no longer defined primarily by their ethnicity and nationality, but by the rule and reign of Christ. They are citizens of the Kingdom of heaven both now and for eternity. This new identity inevitably leads to a clash with secular and religious cultures. These “chosen outsiders” and “resident aliens” form a noncompetitive holy community. They have not been called of God to flee the world or fight the world. They have not been called to withdraw into their own tight-knit culture. They are not separatists, narrow-minded, and opinionated. They do not impress the world as hostile and rigid and angry. Their form of offense, the offense of the cross, is the most winsome and attractive “offensiveness” that human culture has ever known. They understand in themselves their own sinfulness and the fallen human condition. But by God’s grace they have experienced the power of God’s sacrificial love and the responsibility of the ministry of reconciliation.

The New Testament stands for the sanctity of human life and upholds a biblical sexual ethic. The Church’s pro-life stance is for the unborn, the poor, the victims of injustice, the disabled, the addict, the refugee, the abused, and the exploited. The household of faith practices sexual purity outside of marriage and fidelity between a man and woman in marriage. The Church is centered in Jesus Christ who alone offers personal and social salvation. Redemption and reconciliation are foundational to the life and ministry of the church. The impact of Jesus’ kingdom ethic and his call to make disciples of all nations replaces the American dream of the good life with a gospel life marked by the cross. Jesus challenges American exceptionalism and global superiority with the great commandment and the great commission.

The apostle Peter refused to focus on how bad the world was. Instead, he focused on how good the Christian should be. He asked,

“Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:13-18).

What the world needs most is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Wherever possible the people of God advocate for social justice, humanitarian benefits, and political reform, but two realities must always be kept in mind. First, only Christ can bring about the justice and shalom the human heart longs for. No amount of cooperation and contribution with the world will achieve God’s will apart from the cross. Second, the complexity and depravity of the human condition means that unintended negative consequences inevitably trail behind the pursuit of social and political justice.

It is hard to imagine Christians not supporting racial equality, creation care, universal health care

and asylum seekers. Since we are a nation of immigrants we ought to have the world's most efficient and just immigration system. Since we are a nation torn apart by slavery we need to be vigilant in overcoming prejudice and discriminatory practices. We should license and insure guns the same way we do cars. We need extensive justice and police reform and a humane effort to rehabilitate the incarcerated. American self-righteous individualism and white privilege pervades nominal Christianity to such an extent that even sincere believers cannot distinguish between their political ideology and Jesus' kingdom ethic. We need a back to the future, New Testament approach to political theology that takes seriously the household of faith as an outpost of hope in a pluralistic culture.

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