

A Pastoral Response to American Politics

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The polarized American political scene provides a unique challenge for Christians regardless of their political party affiliation and ideology to re-examine their biblical convictions. It is reasonable to conclude that living under the rule of Christ should impact the way Christians view politics and culture.

1. *The Roots of Confusion* – The radical divergence of perspectives found among sincere believers depends on a variety of factors including region, education, age, race, and denomination. This indicates that culture is having a far greater impact on our political thinking than the Bible does. Indifference to what the Bible has to say coupled with ideological indoctrination cripples a Christian understanding of politics and government and distorts the witness of the church. Sincere Christians may differ on how government should be run but they endeavor to think Christianly about government. There may be alternative views on how the poor should be helped, the nation defended, and Wall Street regulated, but these views look to the Bible for their understanding and rationale.

2. *Resident Aliens* – American Christians have lost the New Testament perspective on being resident aliens in their home culture. By virtue of their conversion and baptism the followers of Jesus Christ become strangers in their own homeland. Without moving from one country to another, and without crossing any political or regional boundaries, Christians became resident aliens. 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 non-competitive 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.

3. *One New Humanity* – Christians are identified as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1 Peter 2:9). This is not only a spiritual identity, but a political identity. The people of God are drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9). Christ’s redemption destroys ethnic privilege and pride of race. No person, group, race, tribe, nation or nations has the right to feel morally superior to others. The identity, calling, solidarity, and significance of the people of God is not based on ethnicity, family, heritage, or merit, but on Christ’s atoning once-and-for-all sacrifice. The one new humanity formed in Christ is not part Jewish and part Gentile, nor is it part black and part white. This new race is an act of creation, not a mixture of Asian and Arab, Latin and European. God’s “chosen people” were not meant to divide along ethnic, cultural, racial, social, gender, and generational lines. Since the Christian community is founded solely on Jesus Christ, it is a spiritual reality. This solidarity transcends sociological and psychological compatibility. It is the house of the Spirit, built by the Father on the cornerstone of the Son.

4. *American Exceptionalism* – Many American Christians assume that America is a Christian nation that has been exceptionally blessed by God above all other nations and is in danger of losing or has lost that blessing because of a secular/liberal agenda. They apply 2 Chronicles 7:14 as the perceived antidote to the political crisis. They see themselves as part of a moral majority fighting for marriage between a man and woman and defending the right to life for the unborn. Their strategy is to gain the power of the majority and to legislate these biblical moral principles. Proponents of American exceptionalism are for a strong military, strict immigration rules, lower taxes, and reduced government regulations. They are opposed to welfare for the poor, universal health care coverage, and environmental regulations. They resist the notion of a global free-trade economy even though they have been the beneficiaries of the developing nations' cheap labor for several generations. They feel God has ordained American superiority for the world's sake. This political persuasion identifies more with the American good life than with Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount. Thoughtful Christians who identify with a conservative approach to government should distance themselves from the rhetoric of superiority and resentment.

5. *Progressivism* – Another form of political ideology that flies under the banner of Christendom, identifies itself as “progressive” and celebrates conformity to the spirit of the times. They advocate gay rights, abortion on demand, and radical pluralism. They pride themselves on being open minded and tolerant, but they are in fact radically intolerant of biblical truth. They represent a secular agenda that freely diminishes biblical authority on virtually all matters that run counter to the prevailing cultural ethos.

Neither form of popular cultural Christianity can identify with the apostle Peter's description of the “resident alien.” The alienation fostered by the “conservative” and “progressive” extremes of Christendom is radically different from the social alienation addressed by the apostle Peter. Both the “right's” alien alienation and the “left's” progressive conformity are induced by the world. Discerning the difference between cultural conformity and true alienation is critical to understanding Christ's *for* culture strategy.

6. *True Alienation* – Fidelity to Christ and the holiness he commands invariably leads to cultural conflict and social estrangement, not because Christians are revolutionaries or separatists, but because their holiness is perceived as a social and political threat. Their life together as the people of God produces social alienation. The early Christians knew that their hope was not in Rome nor in the local tribal deities or in the gods of their local professional guilds. The people of God living in America would be better off if they understood that they cannot put their hope in American politics or in the American economy. Some Christians talk as if they had no other identity or loyalty other than to America and when things don't go their way politically they are filled with anger and fear. Pastor Tim Keller writes, “This may be a reason why so many people now respond to U. S. political trends in such an extreme way. . . .They become agitated and fearful for the future. They have put the kind of hope in their political leaders and policies that once was reserved for God and the work of the gospel” (*Counterfeit Gods*, 99). The vitriolic rhetoric and slander expressed by Christians against politicians is an indication not of strength and boldness, but of fear and hate. Frustrated Christians feel that their culture is slipping away from them in spite of their best efforts to “bring back America” and “change the world for Christ.” For many, the American Dream stands for the pursuit of happiness, individual rights, and democratic rule.

7. *Church and Kingdom* – Jesus responded to Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ the Son of the living God,” by uniting Church and Kingdom in one inseparable reality. Scot McKnight writes, “The kingdom is the people under King Jesus who fellowship with one another and form churches. These churches are the politics of Jesus in this world. That is, a local church embodies – or is designed by God to embody – the kingdom vision of Jesus in such a way that it tells the kingdom story. That is a politic, a witness to the world of a new worship, a new law, a new king, a new social order, a new peace, a new justice, a new economics, and a new way of life What Christians want for the nation should first be a witnessed reality in their local church. Until that local church embodies that desire for the nation, the church’s witness has no credibility” (*The Kingdom Conspiracy*, 101-102).

8. *Not of this World* – Jesus never assumed that he would reform the system and remake Rome into the new Israel, but neither did he ever stop resisting evil, showing compassion and doing kingdom work. The Christian before the world is like Jesus before Pilate. Believers need to hear these words over and over again to stay on mission: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). Jesus accepted the fact that the national ideology was materialistic, militaristic, hedonistic, and pluralistic. He knew that the culture was dedicated to a form of tolerance that was categorically intolerant of absolute truth.

9. *Overcoming the Ideological Captivity of the Church* – What was true for the early Christians is true for believers in America. If we have any hope of redeeming our witness, we will have “to disentangle the life and identity of the church from the life and identity of American society.” Sociologist James Hunter continues, “For conservatives and progressives alike, Christianity far too comfortably legitimates the dominant political ideologies and far too uncritically justifies the prevailing macroeconomic structures and practices of our time. . . .The moral life and everyday social practices of the church are also far too entwined with the prevailing normative assumptions of American culture. . . .Christianity has uncritically assimilated to the dominant ways of life in a manner dubious at the least. Even more, these assimilations arguably compromise the fundamental integrity of its witness to the world” (*To Change the World*, 184-185).

10. *Faithful Presence* – Christians are not called to change the world, but to be faithful in the world. They are called to bear witness to the gospel. Jesus’ intercessory prayer in John 17 challenges the triumphal dreaming and guilt-inducing blame that claims the world is as bad as it is because Christians have failed to grasp the reigns of power. The world is the world and the world will be the world until Christ comes again. “The world can be prayed for only to the end that some who now belong to it might abandon it and join with others who have been chosen out of the world” (Don Carson, *John*, 561). Jesus is not calling Christians to aspire for cultural greatness or join the ranks of the elite or take back America in a ground swell of populist support. Jesus’ humble prayer for protection is humiliating to the misguided soul who seeks to impose his or her worldly vision on the church and turn the gospel into a great crusade or a grand cause. Jesus did not set his sights too low; he set his sights on the Holy Father.