

How Should our Religion Inform our Politics?

Rise & Shine, November 11th

Exodus 18:21-23

You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.

Questions: The people that we vote into office have great power to appoint judges and leaders. Therefore, is it more important that we vote in people that we believe fit the verse above, or who we believe will appoint people who fit the verse above to positions of power?

In the News

Religion and Politics: How Evangelicals Reshaped Elections

When he campaigned in 1976, Jimmy Carter often invoked the late theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and his admonition that “the sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world.” That sort of faith-inflected speech from a major national politician was new to most voters. As president, Carter put liberal aspects of his Baptist tradition front and center, whether appealing for racial equality, lamenting economic disparity or making human rights concerns integral to American foreign policy.

A new movement of white evangelicalism awakened during his presidency, one that was socially conservative and hostile to his agenda. In 1979, Moral Majority was founded by the televangelist Jerry Falwell and became a political force that was hostile to abortion rights and homosexuality. Then, in 1980, Carter lost the White House to Ronald Reagan, who had support from 66% of white evangelical voters. They liked Reagan’s stance on issues so much so that they ignored aspects of his character — twice-married, alienated from his children, almost never attended church — that flew counter to much of what they considered elements of an upright life.

American evangelicals had long steered clear of politics, but with the advent of Moral Majority that was no longer so. Randall Balmer, a professor of religion at Dartmouth College, called the moment “the first time in any significant way, evangelicalism [became] interlocked with the Republican Party.” In Reagan they had a president who shared their distaste for modern whirls of social change.

Dr. Donald Critchlow, an American political history professor at Arizona State University with a background in religious studies, said the evangelical vote is critical in this year’s primaries. “Evangelical voters up until about 1980 on the national level, voted Democratic and then it began to swing Republican,” Critchlow said. “So, the Democrats, as a whole, have lost the evangelical vote but I think it’s critical for them. Republicans need to win the youth vote and they need to win the educated voter. For Democrats, they need to figure out a way of cutting into the white vote and a large part of that white vote is evangelical Christians.”

"[The] numbers show evangelicals have a greater passion for politics than most, which could say something about the issues of our day. Some of the biggest political issues today involve evangelicals, which could explain why they are engaged at a higher level than others," said Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center. "Evangelicals care for and tend to be involved in the communities in which they live," Stetzer said.

Donald Trump, thrice-married, credibly accused of multiple extramarital affairs, and given to vulgar speech, is nonetheless vastly supported by evangelical voters. He has talked of grabbing women by the genitals, demeaned immigrants from poor countries and said, in defiance of a central Christian tenet, that he has never seen reason to ask God for forgiveness.

Yet white evangelical support for Mr. Trump exceeded 80 % in the 2016 election; he did better than George W. Bush, who was outspoken about his rebirth through Jesus. Important evangelical figures like Franklin Graham, Billy Graham’s son, are emphatic in their support. “I believe he’s president of the United States for a reason,” Mr. Graham said. “I think God put him there.”

The support appalls some others on the religious right like Michael Gerson, a speechwriter for Bush who was reared in an evangelical family. In an Atlantic magazine article this spring, Mr. Gerson criticized the likes of Mr. Graham and Jerry Falwell Jr. for providing “religious cover for moral squalor.” A

comparable assessment was offered by Timothy Keller, a Presbyterian clergyman, “‘Evangelical’ used to denote people who claimed the high moral ground; now, in popular usage, the word is nearly synonymous with ‘hypocrite.’”

So why support Trump? A survey conducted by the Billy Graham center showed that, across voters for all nominees in the 2016 election, evangelicals were just as likely to be voting in favor of a specific candidate as for another reason. So, while the *who* did matter, the *what* and the *why* mattered also. In fact, many voters chose to look past a candidate as an individual to vote for a specific issue, platform, or party that they represent, seeing the candidates more like objects of representation than as individuals whose values and ideals fit theirs. A majority of evangelicals agreed that their political support should be tied more to praising or criticizing specific issues rather than individual political leaders.

Trump shares and augments evangelicals’ fear that the country they know is slipping away with upheavals like legalized same-sex marriage, acceptance of gay and transgender rights, and the ascension of religious and racial minorities. Those evangelicals, Mr. Gerson wrote, have proved susceptible to “a message of resentful, declinist populism.”

Thus far, Trump has delivered for them in significant ways. His two appointments to the Supreme Court signal a desire to limit or end legalized abortion. Breaking with decades of precedent, he shifted the United States Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, a move long sought by both Israeli leaders and American evangelicals.

However, a younger cohort of evangelical Protestants is increasingly resembling other young Americans in not automatically sharing their elders’ hostility to same-sex marriage, abortion or gay and transgender rights. They are more likely to believe that nurturing the newborn is at least as important as protecting the unborn, and that their self-description as pro-life includes desiring affordable health care for everyone.

In barn-red Texas, some white evangelical women have had it with unquestioned fealty to Republicans. Galvanizing them are Trump administration actions like separating immigrant children from their parents at the southern border, a policy they deem anti-Christian. “I care as much

about babies at the border as I do about babies in the womb,” Tess Clarke of Dallas told a New York Times reporter.

This midterm 75% of white voters who describe themselves as evangelical or born-again Christians (a group that includes Protestants, Catholics and members of other faiths) voted for Republican House candidates in 2018, according to National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll data. That is on par with the share who did so in midterm elections in 2014 (78%) and 2010 (77%).

Will Christians continue to vote Republican as a large block, or begin to vote more with their age and economic demographic groups? For voters who feel as Tess Clarke does, it is a matter of establishing justice. And that, Reinhold Niebuhr might have reminded them were he still living, remains politics’ sad duty.

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

2 Peter 1:8-10

For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble.

The “things” that Peter writes about here are a series of qualities that he believes to be holy: faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love.

Questions: What does it mean to confirm our call and election in reference to the traits described? How can we use this verse to inform our voting?

Romans 8:28

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is writing to a people who are being persecuted and undergoing hardships. His statement above is an

encouragement for the people to love God, stay the course of Christianity, and they will persevere.

Question: Would the early Christians in Rome have voted to put someone in power who was not Christian, but didn't persecute them? Why or why don't you believe this?

1 Timothy 2:1-2

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

Though the verse from 1 Timothy doesn't help us directly with our decisions on who to vote for, it can help us process the results. Regardless of who is in power, these people need our prayers.

Question: Do you find it difficult to pray for someone that you didn't vote for?

Prayer for Sound Government (BCP p.821)

O Lord our Governor, bless the leaders of our land, that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth.

To the President and members of the Cabinet, to Governors of States, Mayors of Cities, and to all in administrative authority, grant wisdom and grace in the exercise of their duties. Amen.