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

EUGENE CHO

JERK  
THOU SHALT NOT BE A  
JERK

A CHRISTIAN'S GUIDE  
TO ENGAGING POLITICS

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CHO

# JERK

THOU SHALT NOT BE A

A Christian's Guide  
to Engaging Politics

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*transforming lives together*

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# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 13

INTRODUCTION: POLITICS MATTER 15

1. THOU SHALT NOT GO TO BED WITH  
POLITICAL PARTIES 27

2. THOU SHALT NOT BE A JERK 55

3. THOU SHALT LISTEN AND BUILD BRIDGES 73

4. THOU SHALT BE ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD 97

5. THOU SHALT LIVE OUT YOUR CONVICTIONS 119

6. THOU SHALT HAVE PERSPECTIVE AND DEPTH 139

7. THOU SHALT NOT LIE, GET PLAYED,  
OR BE MANIPULATED 159

8. THOU SHALT PRAY, VOTE, AND RAISE YOUR VOICE 181

9. THOU SHALT LOVE GOD AND LOVE PEOPLE 211

10. THOU SHALT BELIEVE JESUS REMAINS KING 229

AFTERWORD: THOU SHALT NOT FEAR 247

NOTES 251

## INTRODUCTION

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# POLITICS MATTER

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

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

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

So, why write this book?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You can't play both sides.”

“You're too cowardly.”

“You have no backbone.”

“You're being too political.”

“You're too privileged.”

“Why can't you just focus on Jesus?”

“What kind of pastor are you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THOU SHALT NOT BE A JERK

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



## CHAPTER 1

---

# THOU SHALT NOT GO TO BED WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

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

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

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

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

Then, it happened.

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

*He had won.*

*He was becoming president.*

*The one we had feared.*

*What would become of our country?*

*How could this happen to us?*

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

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

*We had lost.*

*(Imagine more dramatic music here.)*

## **NO ONE PARTY IS PERFECT**

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

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

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

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

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

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

For others, November 2012.

Or maybe it was November 2008.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## FAITH IN CHRIST INFORMS MY VOTE

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

My answer?

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **BUT REAL CHRISTIANS VOTE REPUBLICAN, RIGHT?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## CHOOSING A DANGEROUS PATH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The *New York Times* article explains:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Put another way: this is *idolatry*.

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

## THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS

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

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

He responded:

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

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

There He said:

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

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

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

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

## PROPHETS ARE NEVER POPULAR

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

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

You lie on beds adorned with ivory  
and lounge on your couches.

You dine on choice lambs  
and fattened calves.

You strum away on your harps like David  
and improvise on musical instruments.

You drink wine by the bowlful  
and use the finest lotions,  
but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.

Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile;  
your feasting and lounging will end.

(Amos 6:4–7)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## WHAT DO WE STAND FOR?

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

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



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

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

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

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

## THE DEMOCRATIC SHIFTING TIDE OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHRISTIAN VALUES AND EVANGELICAL INFLUENCERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He continued:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## WE HAVE NO POLITICAL HOME

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

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

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

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

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

She continued:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## WHAT'S ON YOUR HEART AND MIND?

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

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

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

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## CHAPTER 2

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# THOU SHALT NOT BE A JERK

One of the most critical questions Christians must be asking ourselves is, “Are we more in love with the *idea* of following Jesus than actually following Jesus?”

It’s a question I wrestle with myself. As a “professional” clergy, I’m amazed at how, in very subtle and seductive ways, I can be tempted to play the game of Christianity rather than take on the radical, passionate pursuit of worshipping and following Jesus.

To be more blunt:

Do we really believe in Jesus?

Do we really believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior?

Do we really believe in the life of Jesus?

Do we really believe that Jesus is still in control, that

He is sovereign?

And as such, do we really believe in the words and teachings of Jesus because “sometimes, we can’t truly understand the Bible until we obey it”?<sup>1</sup> It’s an important question because there are some hard teachings from Jesus. Now, obviously, nowhere in the Gospels do we have any recording of Jesus actually saying, “Don’t be a jerk,” but He certainly conveys and embodies a life that is antithetical to being a jerk. Jesus exudes tenderness and meekness; His life reflects mercy, justice, and kindness.

Jesus fights for the widows, the marginalized, the poor. Jesus sees the forgotten; He embraces the sick; He welcomes children; He empowers women.

Dr. Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote about how Christians should engage culture in our modern era and painted a beautiful picture of the upside-down ways of God.

Moore said if Christians seem to have ceded moral ground in the recent years, they need to speak to the complex social challenges facing us with bigger vision in mind, looking at the world with the lens of the kingdom of God. He called it “the freakishness of the gospel, which is what gives it its power in the first place.”

From his book *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel*:

The kingdom of God turns the Darwinist narrative of the survival of the fittest upside down (Acts 17:6–7). When the church honors and cares for the vulnerable among us, we are not showing charity. We are simply recognizing the way the world really works, at least in the long run. The child with Down syndrome on

the fifth row from the back in your church, he's not a "ministry project." He's a future king of the universe. The immigrant woman who scrubs toilets every day on hands and knees, and can barely speak enough English to sing along with your praise choruses, she's not a problem to be solved. She's a future queen of the cosmos, a joint-heir with Christ....

The first step to cultural influence is not to contextualize to the present, but to contextualize to the future, and the future is awfully strange, even to us.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' teachings and actions confounded nearly everyone when He walked the earth—including His own family and His disciples who spent nearly every day with Him during His three years of public ministry—and they still do today. In order to live the kingdom way of living, we must routinely question our mind-sets and, certainly, our hearts too. We must remind ourselves again and again of the way of God, which is usually different from the way of the world. Without remembering what Christ taught us, without constant introspection, we shortchange the power of God's work in and through us.

When Jesus says to turn the other cheek, do we believe His words?

When Jesus says to drop our swords, do we believe His words?

When Jesus says to forgive and love our enemies, do we believe His words?

Over the years, I've experienced difficult and painful actions against me. Some people have fabricated outrageous lies about me because of my faith as a Christian and my influence as a pastor. I have been gossiped about and slandered. Some people have disagreed with

my views about immigration and shouted for me to “Go back home.” Some have disagreed with my views on gun violence and gun control, and someone even doctored a video to accuse me of being a mass shooter. Someone threw rocks into our church building because they didn’t agree with my traditional and historical view of human sexuality. Some have taken personal email correspondences between us and, without permission, published them in their blogs, social media, and newspapers. On two occasions, we’ve received death threats on me and my family, and during one of those situations, I subsequently had to move my family out of Seattle for some time for fear of their safety.

Such craziness.

And here’s another confession: each time, I’ve wanted to return harm for harm, as in throw bigger rocks, hurl worse insults, fabricate more outrageous lies, shout louder, make bigger signs, and so forth; but this is precisely why we need to remind ourselves who we are, what we’re about, and most importantly, who we worship. The *who* makes all the difference. We can’t merely be intellectual or cultural Christians who become pawns in a political chess game. As Christians, our integrity still matters. Our commitment to truth telling still matters. Our commitment to justice and the vulnerable still matters. Our commitment to grace and mercy still matters.

Why do these things still matter?

Because our commitment to Jesus *and* His ways still matters.

Church, disagreeing with someone’s politics, views, religion, and ideology is never permission to harass or bully that person. And certainly, it’s never okay to threaten their well-being. Don’t do it. And don’t let people you know do it.

In other words, don’t be a jerk for Jesus.



## THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING OBSESSED WITH WINNING

Even after tearing both Achilles tendons and blowing out both knees playing basketball over the years, I still can't get enough of the sport. As I tell my kids, Jesus is Lord, but *Ball is Life*. As such, I do love a good game of pickup basketball.

One particular game stands out in my mind. I'm thinking it was probably around 2006, and my 5'8" self was ready to hoop. Okay, 5'8" is being very generous, but with shoes and puffed-up hair, I can hit that height easy. My team at the time was Quest Church, and my position was lead pastor and also self-appointed starting point guard. I entered the gym of Seattle Pacific University, a local Christian college near my home. It was an average night—just a game of pickup basketball with some Questers, their friends, and others—but I must have had a sense of pride on my mind. I was pushing forty, the oldest player on the court, and I was not about to let these twentysomething guys get the best of me.

It was supposed to be a casual pickup, Christian fellowship, get to know one another, outreach, kumbaya kind of basketball outing, but I sometimes let the competitive side of my personality take over. And by sometimes, I mean always. I was trash-talking like Jordan—minus his game and the Air Jordan sneakers. It wasn't just tit for tat; I was escalating things and particularly getting in the face of a random guy who had accompanied his friend from Quest. Now mind you, this was supposed to be a venue to welcome our friends who were interested in learning more about church and, most importantly, about Jesus.

Anyway, after this fateful basketball game, one of the other players, a man in his midtwenties, came up to me and said:

I know who you are. I know you're a pastor. In fact, I have been checking out your church. How you acted on the court today was absolutely embarrassing. Because of you, I don't know if I'd ever come back to not just your church, but any church.

Wow. What a wake-up call. I was embarrassed. I knew what this man had said was true, and I was immediately convicted and profusely apologized. Later, a longtime Quest member who was at the game followed up with me as well. And another. What had gotten into me? I had not acted like a Christian; in fact, I had acted contrary to how Jesus told us to act. It's one thing to be competitive, but I had been so obsessed with winning that I had lacked any semblance of sportsmanship, respect, and civility. As I had played, I had been arrogant and incredibly mean spirited. It was embarrassing and painful to lack such self-awareness.

To put it simply, I was a jerk. With a capital *J*.

I'm not saying that we can't be competitive in life. But when we're more obsessed with winning and being right, when we're more obsessed with power and privilege, more obsessed with winning culture wars, and when we act and speak in ways that are completely antithetical to what we say we believe as followers of Christ, people—fellow Christians and non-Christians—can't help but see the dissonance. And well, it has consequences.

I don't know how many times I have played back that game in my mind, or how many times I have prayed for the young man who said he was unlikely to come back to any church because of my behavior. My point is, when Christians—regardless of our political leanings—behave

like jerks and justify our behavior at all costs because of our ideological convictions, we bear false witness to Jesus Christ.

## WE DON'T NEED MORE JERKS FOR JESUS

It often feels like Christians get a bad rap. Sometimes we can be characterized unfairly in popular media. It's true that Christians have a PR problem, and too frequently we are defined by what we are against rather than what we are for. Some of us are quite vocal, and that's defining all of us. While the Bible mentions nearly two thousand references to the need to advocate for the poor and pursue justice, we seem to be focused on hot-button social issues as our defining identifier.<sup>3</sup>

Wouldn't it be amazing if the world clearly saw us as embodying the great commandments to love God and love our neighbors? Unfortunately, that's not the first thing that comes to mind for most non-Christians, though. The Barna Group surveyed young non-Christians in America about the top characteristics of Christians, and these are the top three descriptors:<sup>4</sup>

1. Antigay
2. Judgmental
3. Hypocritical

That's unfortunate, to say the least.

As author and activist Shane Claiborne pointed out when he was also dismayed by this research, nowhere in the findings does it mention that Christians are loving, which is how Jesus said we will be known.

Nor are we described by the fruits of the Spirit—you know, the characteristics of God—joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control, and love. Claiborne said:

It's clear that we have become known for some of the very things that Jesus spoke out against, like self-righteousness, and we haven't been known for how we love like Jesus loved. We've become known more for who we've excluded than for who we've embraced, more for what we're against than what we are for.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, not every Christian is like Fred Phelps, the inflammatory pastor behind Westboro Baptist Church who protests military funerals because of homosexuality in America. (I struggle to understand the logic.) But then again, not every Christian is Mother Teresa. We are pulled between the culture and values we know we should prize, and the societal and human inclinations to judge and categorize. Everything and everyone have their place, and by this logic, if you are not with me, you are against me.

And perhaps in no area of life is this “my way or the highway” mentality clearer than in politics. We'll point to research in a bit, but for a moment, can we simply agree that wading into current political discussions is the equivalent of bathing in a cesspool? Especially in election seasons?

We must learn to be civil with one another, including those we disagree with—even political candidates. This is one of the great challenges in our culture today. We are called to love one another, including those who don't look like us, feel like us, think like us . . . or vote like us.

In voicing and pursuing our convictions, we not only represent ourselves as followers of Christ; we represent Christ. This is not to suggest we can't have fierce convictions, but there is a distinction between being passionate about our convictions and being mean spirited and jerks. This is worth repeating: Be careful not to dehumanize those you disagree with. In our self-righteousness, we can become the very things we criticize in others.

*There is a difference.*

I'm all for contending for convictions, but let's not be jerks in the process. Be respectful. Be mature. Be wise. The world doesn't need more *jerks for Jesus*.

## SHROUD OF ANONYMITY

Christians are better than average on the jerkiness gauge, right? We're more civil? Please tell me we are! Anyone? Bueller?

By this point, you might be able to predict the answer.

If you want to see the worst in some of your friends or family, or perhaps the worst in yourself, just wade into a challenging issue. Whether you are atheist or faith-filled believer, devoted Christian or Grand Wizard of the Church of the Trees, you know people can be terrible online and in political discussions. And sadly, not much differentiates Christians from nonbelievers—even when Christians interact on many Christian websites.

Dr. Doug Mendenhall of Abilene Christian University measured the incivility of posts and responses across religious and political sites, looking at official blogs that were affiliated with ten major denominations.

He learned that while there was strong potential for disagreement among the denominational sites given the tendency of evangelicals to support Republican candidates and causes while the mainstream denominations favor Democratic candidates and liberal causes, the official sites “consistently demonstrated low incivility in their official blog posts throughout the election year.”<sup>6</sup>

So far so good.

Unfortunately, though, unofficial Christian sites closely mirrored the incivility of secular political sites. Mendenhall attributed this to different rules of social behavior between the two groups, even though both were primarily Christian in their perspectives. He also observed that the “shroud of anonymity is much thicker for commenters on the political blogs” than for commenters on either type of Christian site.

Given that research found anonymity for commenters can greatly increase incivility, it was not surprising that on the political sites, where commenters almost never used their own names, incivility was significantly higher than among commenters on either the official or unofficial Christian blogs, where they typically used names or a nicknames that were closely tied to their actual names.

Mendenhall’s research also concluded that incivility in the political realm was not the sole property of conservatives or liberals. We are equal-opportunity attackers. But as for those harmed, women in particular are targets of online abuse.

Sarah Sobieraj of Tufts University has published widely on political incivility. Her two-year study concluding in 2018 included in-depth interviews with thirty-eight women who had been the victim of what she terms “digital abuse.” She found that aggressors intimidate, shame,

and discredit women and regularly “call attention to women’s physicality as a way to pull gender—and the male advantage that comes with it—to the fore in digital exchanges.”<sup>7</sup>

In an Amnesty International study of tweets sent to female journalists and politicians in the US and the UK, the organization identified 7.1 percent of the tweets as “problematic” or “abusive.” The study also found that women of color are particularly victimized by online abuse: 34 percent more likely to receive it than white women. Black women specifically were 84 percent more likely to suffer abuse than white women. And Asian women stood out, as they were 70 percent more likely to receive racist or ethnic slurs than white women.<sup>8</sup> This study did not focus on a Christian population specifically, but this is deeply disturbing nonetheless.

We must stop ignoring this and call it out for the abuse it is. Christians, let’s be salt and light in this. And Christian leaders, if we are going to lead with credibility, we also need to show a better way, and when needed, we must be held to account.

## WHAT INSPIRES TROLLS?

Why does it always seem to get so bad online, as we dig ourselves into holes from which we can’t get out?

Conversations about why interactions on the web and social media have taken such a toxic turn often include speculation about anonymity—the faceless “safety” of the web for trolls and other malcontents. Of course, sometimes we are not anonymous, just absent when we say things online that we would never say in person because our parents and society taught us better.

Some computer scientists from Stanford and Cornell universities examined the problem and identified two factors that influence why people troll.<sup>9</sup> The first is a person's mood. When the experiment was designed to put people in a negative mood, they were much more likely to start trolling. The researchers also discovered that "trolling ebbs and flows with the time of day and day of week." People troll late at night, but infrequently in the morning. And while the researchers didn't speculate about rainy days, Mondays do get people down. Trolling peaks on Monday, ironically enough, the day after church.

The second factor is context. An online conversation that begins with a troll comment is twice as likely to be trolled by others than one that starts without a troll comment. Misery loves company. "The more troll comments in a discussion, the more likely that future participants will also troll the discussion," they said. "Altogether, these results show how the initial comments in a discussion set a strong, lasting precedent for later trolling."

The researchers warn that since trolling is situational, ordinary people can be influenced to troll and spread the behavior to others. "As this negative behavior continues to propagate, trolling can end up becoming the norm in communities if left unchecked."

A psychologist at Stanford has a slightly different take on the problem. In his 2012 research, he concluded that private traits and attributes can be predicted based on responses to social media posts.<sup>10</sup> With about seventy Facebook likes, his program could accurately predict sexual orientation, political affiliation, religious belief, tendencies to substance abuse, and more.

Sociologist Frank Furedi pointed out that believing new technologies will be the end of us is not a new phenomenon. Plato worried



that reading and writing would weaken the mind and destroy people's memory. Furedi espoused that the evil on the internet is just the latest iteration of past evils (for example, Neo-Nazis are inspired by racists from the past).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, people are less and less optimistic about the social impact of the internet. A 2018 Pew Research Center study found that the percentage of adults 65 and older who believe that the internet has been mostly good for society has declined 14 points since 2014, from 78 percent to 64 percent. Keep in mind that older adults have been particularly rapid adopters of social media. Younger adults have been more consistent, but even their support has declined, from 79 percent in 2014 to 74 percent in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

## RESIST THE TEMPTATION

I am not alone in the temptation to behave like a jerk.

Though we live in an amazing era, with electric cars, K-pop on demand, and unlimited information at our very fingertips via smartphones and other technological devices, our connected world provides such an amazing platform for being a jerk.

Before the advent of the internet, jerks usually needed to be big, physically intimidating bullies, or people who weren't hugged enough as a child, or people in power who never got the memo about kindness. But today, because of the internet and social media, anyone can be a jerk. Even misguided grandmas and pastors can be jerks. We just sit there fuming, spewing our opinions, relevant or not. We say things that almost no one in real life would ever say to another person, and somehow, we're okay with it.

I know I've been a jerk before, but many times it's those close calls of jerkiness that come to mind. I imagine posting something anonymously. And occasionally, I have written something, a nugget to lob into a conversation, but thankfully in most of these circumstances, I decide to delete it before I post.

And sometimes, I'm not that wise.

## RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY

Do your homework. Learn about people. Have a conversation. Start with someone near you ... and you might want to consider someone who does not look like you. These interracial relationships make a huge difference in changing perspectives. Even though five decades have passed since the Civil Rights Movement, America remains largely segregated.

A study of social networks among Americans shows this with great clarity. To be clear, the social networks I'm talking about in this study are not social media networks, like Facebook, but the small network of people whom you might discuss important matters with, including close friends or family.

The result of the study: For 75 percent of white people, their close social network was entirely white, with no minority presence. For black people, 65 percent of people said their social networks were all black. Just under half of Hispanics have a core social network that is all Hispanic.<sup>13</sup> To break it down even further:

In a 100-friend scenario, the average white person has 91 white friends; one each of black, Latino,

Asian, mixed race, and other races; and three friends of unknown race. The average black person, on the other hand, has 83 black friends, eight white friends, two Latino friends, zero Asian friends, three mixed race friends, one other race friend and four friends of unknown race.<sup>14</sup>

And we wonder why we often don't understand one another. The point is, we're attempting to have conversations in America about critical issues, but so many of us have no friendships or relationships with people of other races—and probably even fewer conversations with people of other faiths or with people who don't share our viewpoints.

## DEHUMANIZATION VERSUS IMAGO DEI

Jesus told the disciples in John 4:4 that “now he had to go through Samaria.” I suspect that the disciples were all very concerned about Jesus after this suggestion because, simply, well-knowing Jewish people did not travel through Samaria.

Why?

Starting from a conflict in 2 Kings 7, Samaritans began to be dehumanized or, in other words, thought of as “less than.” They were perceived as dirty, unclean, inferior, half-breeds, contaminated, and as a result, vilified and otherized (sadly, seen as “the other”). This only led to deep-seated animosity. Now, multiply that misunderstanding and animosity over generations upon generations. This is why there was such ill will between Jews and Samaritans, which explains why Jesus declared His intent to walk through Samaria.

On this journey, Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman at a well, and with His commitment to both grace and truth, He engaged this woman with such humanity and dignity. The opposite of humanity and dignity is dehumanization and otherizing. When we dehumanize others, it can lead people to the justification of words, actions, and even policies that demean and degrade other people. For example, Nazis referred to Jews as rats, Hutus called Tutsis cockroaches in the Rwandan Genocide, African Americans in the United States—both during slavery and Jim Crow—were compared with apes or monkeys, and in current times, radical monks in Burma refer to the Rohingya minority group as animals.

Of course, this stands in deep contrast to the theology of the *Imago Dei* (the Image of God). As Christians, we believe that every single human being bears the image of God. We believe that every human being is fearfully and wonderfully made.<sup>15</sup> Don't miss it: Jesus was declaring His politics here. In the kingdom of God, Jesus went through Samaria with a determined and resolute mind to break down barriers of hatred and cultural, ethnic, and racial prejudice to replace them by building bridges of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, love, and hope.

Jesus was no pushover, and indeed He was quick to stand up and speak out in key moments, like cleansing the temple of merchants and money changers. But how many other times did Jesus exhibit restraint and love to those who did not deserve it? Jesus healed people, forgave them of their sins, and told them to stop sinning. Jesus loved all, time and again, in story after story. It must have been exhausting. At many key moments, Jesus also withdrew to pray—to once again become aligned or “one” with the Father. With that in mind, should we not

also pause and ask the Spirit to inform us, to guide our thoughts and actions? That's tough to do when it's so easy to lob a quick and cutting comeback—but a spirit of peace must override our inclination for fire and fury.

To devalue the life of another, to be a jerk, is counter to the kingdom. To be a jerk, to revel in earthly shouting matches, sells short the radically different way of Christ. It's a poor representation of Christianity and also a foolish political move. Before all of our best arguments, let's first show love. That's what we're supposed to be known for, after all.

## WHAT'S ON YOUR HEART AND MIND?

1. When you find yourself disagreeing with someone's politics, views, religion, or ideology, what is your usual response? Does it align with kingdom values?
2. In what instances are you quick to stand up and voice your opinion? Whom do you share your opinions with?
3. Have you encountered a “jerk for Jesus”? How influential did that person seem to be?

## CHAPTER 3

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# THOU SHALT LISTEN AND BUILD BRIDGES

The countercultural way of God was spoken through James chapter 1 in the New Testament, when he said believers in humble circumstances should take pride in their high position and the wealthy would fade away like a wildflower. That's certainly not the way of the world, nor is the desire to actually listen, a virtue James extolled immediately afterward:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. (James 1:19–20)

We feed on anger and outrage today. It's a sad reality, but our society runs on the currency of fear. And we are too often so slow to listen. I think my wife tells me this, though I cannot be sure.

One of the most profound privileges and responsibilities as a pastor is to welcome people to the Communion table, which declares that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are indeed good news for the whole world and that salvation is offered by the grace of Christ to all those who place their trust in Him. Because of the grace and love of Jesus Christ, the church can truly be countercultural in that it welcomes all who profess faith in Jesus Christ to the table.

I can't imagine any other institution that can gather people from all backgrounds, ethnicities, and stories—and even political inclinations or affiliations. When we serve Communion in our churches, we do not have a wine line for the Left, a grape-juice line for the Right, and a gluten-free line for the centrists. I'm reminded of the truly good news declared in Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, which still has deep truth to us today:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28 NKJV)

And perhaps we can make this contextual adjustment for our polarizing times:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, Republican nor Democrat; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, we must work to remain in friendship and fellowship. As Christians, we need to agree that the most significant aspects of our

relationship are not our politics, our political views, or our political affiliations but that we are connected together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:3–6)

Politics has its role. But Christ is the most significant aspect of our community.

## DINNER WITH AN ENTRÉE OF EMPATHY

Ah, the holidays. You feel the nip in the air on late fall walks through the neighborhood and smell smoke drifting from fireplaces for the first time of the season.

The weather cools and days shorten, which means that Seattleites mostly go into hibernation mode. You put your hands in your pockets, knowing that Thanksgiving and Christmas are right around the corner. It's time for your annual intake of stuffing and pumpkin pie.

Beyond food, the holidays represent something much more meaningful: reconnecting with family—close and distant. Being together. But it's not all warm and fuzzy. Increasingly, so many of us dread the side dish of the holiday meal: uncomfortable political conversations with extended family at the dinner table.



Raise your hand if that's you!

Maybe you lean politically left and you're worried about Uncle Bud and if he might share some tone-deaf, borderline-racist rambling about immigration and "*those* people." Or perhaps you lean politically right and you're worried about your outspoken socialist nephew, David, and his vegan girlfriend, Ann—who thoroughly confused you because she identified herself as she/her/hers the first time you met her at the same holiday gathering last year.

Holidays have always been a stressful time. But don't these meals seem even more unpleasant because of political discord? No amount of smiling while saying "Pass the potatoes" can change the fact that your aunt is giving you the serious stink eye.

And we know the holiday family gatherings are coming soon because of the inevitable rants on social media. You know how it goes. Jim is upset about having to see Uncle Bud, David, Ann, or Stink-Eye Aunt. What's interesting is that folks who post such stuff don't ever consider that other family members are likely saying or feeling the exact same things about *them*. Self-awareness, anyone?

Turkey and stuffing aside, why would you want to re-create all the uncomfortable parts of a politicized family holiday meal ... and have those conversations with strangers?

Incredibly, having dinner with strangers and talking about politics is exactly what came to the mind of an Asian American woman named Justine Lee one day after the 2016 election, the election in which Hillary Clinton called half of Trump's supporters "a basket of deplorables."<sup>1</sup> Yes, this was the same election where Trump invented a mocking nickname for nearly every political enemy and speculated that "Lyn" Senator Ted Cruz's father might have been in on the

assassination of JFK.<sup>2</sup> Yes, the state of politics and the lack of civility seem to be worsening day by day.

The day after the election, Lee had an epiphany. What about gathering people from a variety of political and social backgrounds to talk and share dinner together? Lee was not a political operative; she was a marketer in the San Francisco Bay Area. But she cared about decency, and cared about America, so she and her friend Tria Chang cofounded a group called Make America Dinner Again (MADA).

The group says while people have many venues to protest, donate, and fight, MADA is an avenue to *listen*. The dinners are small, six to ten guests with a variety of political viewpoints. During the evening, facilitators help ensure respectful conversations and guide activities, while everyone shares some good food.

“We think of food and a warm meal as sort of a nice conduit to conversation and understanding,” Lee said.<sup>3</sup>

The commonality with all who attend a dinner? They want to know and understand their neighbors in real life who may think or live differently. MADA is about gaining empathy, where perspectives are respectfully aired and unlikely relationships form.

Since the first MADA gathering in San Francisco, the group has grown substantially, with facilitated dinners happening in more than dozens of cities across the country, and now inspiring a UK member of Parliament to host a dinner between people aligning with the “Leave” and “Stay” factions of Brexit.<sup>4</sup>

Among those who have bought into this idea is ... wait for it ... conservative talk-show host Glenn Beck, who put together his own event for his news outlet, the Blaze, cohosting with a successful gay Hollywood producer named Riaz Patel, who is now friends with Beck.<sup>5</sup>

I was stunned when I heard Beck was on board with this. I've never been a huge Glenn Beck fan, as he's been incredibly divisive. He's said some outrageous things to discourage Christians from pursuing justice, including the recommendation to "run as fast as you can" if you see the phrase "social justice" on your respective church website.<sup>6</sup>

So, when I heard Beck was opening himself up to hear other perspectives, I was skeptical, but also hopeful. Beck said when we talk to folks who aren't like us in a setting like this, our perceived adversary becomes just another person at dinner, regardless if they're on the other end of the political spectrum.

"No matter how much we disagree with the person sitting right next to us, and we were sitting on opposite ends, the most important thing is that we never lost sight of our humanity," Beck said.

The topics for the event hosted by Beck and Patel were not easy. Socialism. Gun laws—and how to reduce shootings. Freedom of speech. Censorship. All important, real, and very messy conversations.

I figured if Glenn Beck checked out MADA, I needed to experience it for myself. So I signed up for the local Seattle chapter of MADA and received a confirmation email after a couple of weeks. Admittedly, I was nervous. I didn't quite know what to expect. Who would be the other guests? Would there be a balance? Would enough conservatives attend? Actually, do any exist in Seattle? Would it begin with respectful listening and eventually disintegrate into shouting, finger-pointing, and MMA fighting? Should I be working out? What would people think of me being a Christian and a pastor ordained in a denomination containing one of the most horrendous words known to progressive Seattleites: *evangelical*? And most importantly, since it's a potluck, what do I bring?

Friday night came along, and a group of seven strangers (including our MADA host) gathered for dinner in the basement of a local church. Go figure. To my surprise, we were an eclectic, multiethnic, and multigenerational group of people: a teacher, a bartender, a pastor, a techie, a college student, a receptionist, and a nonprofit worker. After what was honestly a delicious meal (shout-out to the person who brought those killer chicken wings), we shared our respective stories and what drew us to the gathering. It was clear that while we were all over the map politically, it was our frustration over the political landscape that was the common bond. We discussed abortion, gun control, racism, privilege, immigration, and more. We discussed, shared, listened, discussed, and listened some more. If I'm honest, I cringed a couple of times—especially when someone mentioned we should do away altogether with borders and simply have one human nation.

But that night, what stood out the most for me was meeting Amanda (not her real name). I'm guessing she was probably in her midfifties because she told the group she and her husband were empty nesters. She said she was Republican, voted for Trump, owned some guns, including the one she revealed she was carrying with her, and served at her local church. Additionally, she had been a devoted teacher in a Seattle public school for the past couple of decades. She shared of her pain and experience in Seattle as a Christian—stories similar to those I've heard from other evangelical Christians in our area: mocked, ridiculed, dismissed, ignored, and even bullied.

As a teacher, she pushed back against the decision by the Seattle School District teachers' union to have teachers wear "Black Lives Matter" T-shirts. She made it clear that she wasn't against teachers

wearing the BLM shirts but rather every teacher being required to wear them. She emotionally pleaded that she loved her students, including her black and brown students, which was why she kept showing up to work every single day for over twenty years. But she couldn't support the organization because she didn't agree with everything they stood for.

With her head lowered and finding it difficult to make eye contact with the group, Amanda recalled the past couple of years being the most difficult time for her as a teacher because of the subsequent blackballing, ostracizing, and dismissing that took place. Fellow teachers who were once friendly and chatty with her altogether ignored her, especially when rumors circulated that she was ... a Jesus-believing Christian.

After several hours together, our eclectic group of seven didn't solve the ailments of our society and culture. We didn't cancel the national debt. We didn't solve homelessness in our city. We didn't resolve the opioid crisis. We didn't present a proposal for comprehensive immigration reform. We didn't figure out how to construct a gun-control policy. Nope, we didn't fix anything, but we acknowledged that while our views were different, we weren't enemies. We took time to listen, to empathize, and in doing so, we became a little more understanding, a little more human.

And that's my point. It's way too simplistic to reduce others and their views. While it's important for us to acknowledge our views and convictions and, when needed, to speak up and contend for them, it's nearly impossible to have meaningful dialogue, and thus progress, if we have no idea how others feel and why they have those feelings. Civility is impossible without a genuine commitment to listen.

## YEARNING TO LISTEN

In December of 2015, then-candidate Donald Trump proposed banning Muslims from entering the United States, restricting an entire religion of people—barring anyone from that religious group who was not already living in America. Trump was speaking at a campaign rally in South Carolina days after a shooting that was believed to have been inspired by the Islamic State terrorist group.

“Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what the hell is going on,” the future president said to cheers at a rally in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina.<sup>7</sup>

The state of South Carolina, meanwhile, is home to few Muslims, a fraction of 1 percent of the population. And nationwide, Muslims remain a small part of the population—just 1.1 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Across the country, in my hometown of Seattle, radio producer Ross Reynolds heard the proposal to ban all Muslims from entry and wondered, *How many non-Muslim Americans even know a Muslim?*

With that question in mind, a new series was born on the local NPR radio station, KUOW. It’s called “Ask A ...” and has a similar concept to Make America Dinner Again, an effort to create a transparent and respectful community dialogue about meaty issues.

From KUOW:

The concept is simple: Get eight people from a group that’s in the news and set up conversations with eight people who want to know more about the group. They each have one-to-one conversations until all

have met. Then we have a group discussion and continue the conversations over a meal.

It's a way to break out of our echo chambers and make connections with others in our community.<sup>9</sup>

The first "Ask A ..." segment was "Ask A Muslim," and that topic was repeated two more times. Other segments have also aired, covering topics as diverse as gun control and sexual identity. An early episode was "Ask A Trump Supporter." While it's likely that few people at the Trump rally in South Carolina knew any Muslims, it's also quite likely that not very many people listening to the NPR station in Seattle were tight with Trump supporters.

The folks who agreed to be interviewed in the "Ask A Trump Supporter" event had a variety of perspectives about the president. One woman said she was most pleased about Trump's Supreme Court nominees and most disappointed by Trump's move toward repealing and replacing Obamacare, as the Republicans didn't have a good plan.

Other perspectives from Trump supporters:

"I think he's crazy like a fox."

"He screws up and he just keeps going. He doesn't quit."

"I guess I should have expected that he wouldn't really be ready for some of the details of the work."

The small audience at the radio station studio took in the dialogue, sharing a meal with their new acquaintances, curious about their personal stories and what motivated their perspectives and why.

KUOW says the dinners are so successful, people typically don't want to leave when the events wrap up. Researchers with the station were curious about the impact of these dinners—if they served a purpose beyond being a compelling radio story. Initial findings were promising. KUOW conducted three surveys: before the event, immediately after, and three months after.

Once the people who were asking questions got to know about someone, such as a Trump supporter or a Muslim, they were quizzed about their view of empathy and understanding of the people they interviewed. The findings showed positive feelings toward the group increased after the meetings and stayed higher than pre-event levels long term.

Make Dinner Great Again and Ask A ... are both challenging people like you and me to rethink our perspectives, but for many of us, our propensity is still to protect our views, our tribe, or our narrative, however we define it. Getting to know our neighbors is not a onetime vaccination against intolerance. We must stay in relationship with people who are not like us, long term.

## LEARNING TO LISTEN IN NEBRASKA

Living in Seattle has given me great visibility to a movement of God in a city that largely seems to be cynical, and at times adversarial, about all things involving religion—especially if it smells anything remotely close to evangelicalism. Seattle is a place of life, innovation, secularism, deep faith, skepticism, and joy. And the stereotypes are largely true. Seattle is quite liberal politically.



As we challenge ourselves to go deep, to be circumspect, to know the issues, it's also of critical importance to get our noses out of books and media and actually engage with others who don't look or think like us. We must expose ourselves to other people and get vulnerable.

One of my biggest revelations and perspective changes has been taking place fifteen hundred miles from here, as I was thinking about fishing—but catching so much insight along the way.

While some people at my church affiliate as Republicans, and over the years I've had numerous conversations and meals with friends and neighbors who lean right, I don't know many Trump supporters personally, so my trips to Nebraska have been enlightening—and humbling. For the past decade, I've taken an annual trip to Nebraska for an extended rest. A week or two of disconnecting from social media, diving into those books that have stacked up on my desk, and lots of solitude for prayer and Scriptures. And I'm an avid fisherman. I also go to Nebraska to hone my skills to pursue my secret ambition to become a professional bass fisherman someday. I'm sort of joking but not. Please sponsor me!

I've been to Nebraska so often that I have met people and developed friendships there. We text. We get together. We have meals. After building relationship and trust, we're able to ask questions and learn about one another's lives, families, hopes, and concerns. I hear their fear and their pain, of not being heard, of feeling forgotten as coastal cities seem to receive most of the attention. I hear from farmers who feel invisible, as their suffering and sacrifice are not highlighted by the press. I remember learning from them about the devastating drought in 2012 and how it impacted nearly every single person in the region. They said it was one of the worst droughts they had experienced since the 1930s.

As I listened to these stories, I realized I hadn't heard a single word about this drought even though I carefully follow the news. I was silent when they asked, "Where was America? Where were you?"

I had an epiphany as I listened to them. It was a moment of déjà vu. Elements of their stories were similar to so many stories I'd heard before, but from people of other races, people aligned with another political party.

If anyone was listening to our conversation and hearing stories about how my Nebraskan friends felt invisible, abandoned, and forgotten, they could walk away thinking they had just heard from someone on the left who felt invisible, abandoned, or forgotten. I know that it sounds corny (get it?), but it reminded me that people have way more in common than we realize.

I was somewhat surprised. In a rural, nearly all-white area, I was recognizing echoes from urban communities. Perhaps a person of color in a majority-white area who feels like all eyes are on them, except when it comes to friendship. Perhaps a refugee who received a lot of love when arriving to this country, but no notable support or community a few months in. Perhaps a single mom who is doing everything she can to make ends meet, but it's never enough.

I heard those same sentiments from hardworking farmers. Feeling as if their opinions were disregarded. Not seeing themselves represented in society. No empathy from the country and its elected leaders for the challenges they were facing. Unemployment or underemployment. Extremely high healthcare costs. Living from paycheck to paycheck with no hope in sight to get ahead and have financial security.

I also asked them, "Have you ever had conversations with people who have voted differently than you?"

It's a question I often ask people in Seattle. All of us need to consider it. Are we intentionally surrounding ourselves with people who have opinions that are not like ours? Do we care enough about our neighbors to get to know them, their backgrounds, their beliefs, their opinions? Do we care enough to go deep in our knowledge about issues that matter to us?

We are shouting about and arguing with groups of people, but we don't have relationships with people in those groups. This can happen to churches also as we develop echo chambers.

I wouldn't have said this the first couple of years I went there, but I look forward to going to Nebraska, not just because of the fishing, but because of the people I would have never met and, thus, understood. It is surprising, but I have seen this come true in my own life. It is possible to befriend people whom you might disagree with on certain issues. It is possible to love and listen to your neighbors, even if they believe something different politically.

We keep learning again and again from the Scriptures, and especially the ministry of Jesus, that relationships matter. And relationships aren't possible if we're unwilling to listen to one another and share our respective stories.

## LEARN TO UNDERSTAND

Focus on the Family has become a different organization under the leadership of Jim Daly, since he took the helm after Dr. Dobson. I've enjoyed meeting him on numerous occasions, for meetings at their headquarters in Colorado Springs and even at numerous advocacy gatherings in Washington, DC. One time I had the opportunity to

record an interview with him on his radio show in which we discussed many things, including the story of One Day's Wages, a nonprofit that my wife and I began to engage the complex issues of extreme global poverty. Focus on the Family still leans to the right politically but has become a little less political in its identity over the past few years.

I deeply appreciate Daly's desire to be a brave yet humble voice for Christ in the world, but perhaps more than being a voice, I applaud the work he has done to have a listening ear, which is often the bravest action a person can take. In our culture, speaking up has often been praised as courageous. There's certainly some truth to that, but maybe quieting down and listening to others is courageous too. We could all listen more, especially to those who've been silenced historically.

Daly contributed an essay to the book *Still Evangelical?*, outlining his thoughts about the needed posture of Christians as we attempt to engage culture. He wrote:

As evangelicals engage the world (for that is our full orientation—taking the good news of the gospel of Christ to those outside the church and into the public square), we must remember that no group is monolithic. Just as we don't care for it when people view all Christians as a caricature, we should understand that "the world" isn't monolithic either. Not all atheists are angry with the church and want to steal away our children. Not all college professors and media professionals are "humanists," out to attack Christianity at every turn. Not everyone outside our community hates Christians or dislikes our engagement in the culture. Not even most.<sup>10</sup>

Daly said that because each person is an individual created by God, they're as unique as a snowflake—and we should embrace people in their uniqueness. He continued, saying that Christians should always have two questions in mind as we engage with those around us:

1. Help me understand what you believe.
2. What brought you to those conclusions?

This requires being good listeners. People who met Pope John Paul II throughout his life remarked about what an intense listener he was. It seemed that nothing else existed to him when he engaged with someone. Have you ever spoken with someone like that? If you have, I'm sure you can picture them right now and recall how they made you feel.

In any conversation, political or otherwise, each of us can choose to give the gift of listening to others. That's good news for the future of our world.

## **BETTER ANGELS FOR AMERICA**

Shortly after the 2016 presidential election, three marriage and family therapists with deep experience in helping people talk to each other decided the country needed them. What began as a day of guided conversations between ten Trump supporters and eleven Clinton supporters in South Lebanon, Ohio, grew to become Better Angels, a nonprofit with the declared goal to depolarize America.

In that first day's effort, people discovered they really liked each other. They had things in common. And they didn't have to agree, or change their minds about what they believed, in order to treat each

other with respect and kindness. Today, Better Angels plans twenty or more events per month nationwide, some with as few as a dozen participants. They've received national news coverage for this rare idea that people who disagree can talk to one another. Pleasantly.

Every aspect of the organization—its board, staff, event participants—represents red and blue. Keynote speakers at the 2019 national convention included Hawk Newsome, chairman of Black Lives Matter NY, and Alexandra Hudson, educational consultant at the Liberty Fund and a former Trump appointee.

The Better Angels pledge is focused on three simple ideas that many find unlikely to impossible:

- As individuals, we try to understand the other side's point of view, even if we don't agree with it.
- In our communities, we engage those we disagree with, looking for common ground and ways to work together.
- In politics, we support principles that bring us together rather than divide us.<sup>11</sup>

What a concept. Actually getting to know our neighbors rather than vilifying them. It reminds me of something Jesus would do.

## **BREAKING BREAD—AN INSPIRED IDEA**

As I reflect on the many stories of Jesus, it's clear that He loved to eat. So simple. So human. So divine. His first miracle was at a wedding feast, when He changed water into wine. He sought out Levi, a tax

collector and thus an enemy of the people, and yet the next thing you know, Jesus is eating with Levi and a group of tax collectors. Jesus taught us a story about love for our neighbors while asking a Samaritan woman for water—all while walking through Samaria, a path few Jews took during those times because of the hostility and tension between them and Samaritans. Also, eating with Mary and Martha and seeing the better way. Feeding the five thousand and so many other stories.

Jesus not only loved to eat; He also loved the connection and community that happens when people sit together and are nourished together. If you want to think of a guy who does not discriminate with his dinner guests, Jesus is example number one.

In Luke 14, Jesus accepted a dinner invitation to the home of a Pharisee. Over this meal, they had tough but real conversations—not online or in cryptic text messages—but over a meal. In person. Face to face.

I think back to the Last Supper and how Jesus willingly ate with Judas. Yes, the same Judas who ate right before he went out to turn Jesus in to the authorities. Jesus shared dinner with the man who would betray and help lead Him to His own execution. It's true, just when we think we get what it means to follow Him, Jesus washes the feet of His disciples, including the man He knew would betray Him, the one who would deny Him, and the others who would abandon Him.

In fact, in the momentous moment that rocked human history, those closest to Jesus still didn't grasp ... Jesus. At the same dinner, His disciples jockeyed for positions of power and influence. Who was greater? Who was second in power? Who was next in line? Who would be the right-hand man?

During that meal, Peter pledged to be by Jesus' side always, and yet we know what happened. Peter, the rock, would disown Jesus three times, just a few hours later. Yet Jesus sat down and ate with His family of friends and believers. It was a radical move. It was a move of an all-powerful God who exemplified the way to live.

This love-your-neighbor-kingdom imagination and living is more scandalous and countercultural than we can ever possibly understand—but try we must. This is what it means to not just know about Jesus but to follow Jesus.

Make America Dinner Again and Ask A ... are occasions that bring out the mind-set of Christ in secular situations. But for some of the participants in these events, it's deeply spiritual, as these are the kinds of purposeful encounters that can lead even the jaded among us into God's reconciling work.

The Seattle Chapter head of Make America Dinner Again is a twentysomething woman named Emily Nelson Lewis. She happens to attend my church, Quest, and is married to our student ministry director, Phil Lewis. She is a devoted student of the Scriptures, attending seminary and currently working at the intersection of the arts and church. Emily calls herself a "hospitality artist," which is accurate, considering the finesse needed to bring constructive dialogue and bridge building to something as contentious as politics in our modern era, especially in a polarizing place like Seattle.

The dynamics of race are also real in her own life, as she's Caucasian and married to an African American man. Emily grew up in a small town in Montana with overwhelmingly conservative politics, and Phil was raised in the suburbs of Seattle. Emily says she's been drawn to the idea of MADA because of polarization and brokenness in her own life



story—and sees that MADA has given her a chance to point people to the value in each of our stories. Since April of 2018, she and other MADA facilitators have hosted dozens of events, with more than five hundred people sharing dinners together so far.

In describing the MADA dinners, Emily also brings clarity on a related topic. She says her fellow millennials seems to be entirely comfortable cutting others out when relationships become uncomfortable. She calls it “cancel culture,” a term that’s becoming more common, and it’s not describing paring down online subscriptions.

Have you ever been ghosted? Blocked? Unfriended? Emily’s words:

It is easier to unfollow, unsubscribe and delete the existence of those who think, act, vote or live differently than you. When we exclusively engage difficulty online, it becomes easier and more tempting to forget the humanity of others. This is our reality, and it’s one that has created a relational gap so wide that we’ve become paralyzed by the thought of engaging difficult conversations, even with those we’d call friends.

By the nature of a person “canceling” another person, we see how transactional life can be, when life truly is meant to be lived with and for others. Of course, each generation has traits that seem similar, decade after decade, such as young people being categorized as lazy or selfish.

But now, with our ability to make social tribes, we curate people who are just like us, and shut others out. We’re comfortable with it. And it’s not just a millennial or Gen Y thing. It’s something that can

influence all of us. Not only is this happening more, but it's being encouraged more. It's not just on the fringes but supported by our political leaders and, sadly, even our church and spiritual leaders. I've heard it preached about and spoken on more occasions than I wish to remember in which church leaders suggest it's good to engage in "cancel culture" for the sake of personal convictions and healthy boundaries. Convictions and healthy boundaries are certainly important, but we need a deeper imagination that goes beyond tribalism and cancel culture.

Through dinners with hundreds of people with a variety of backgrounds, men and women who have each experienced life differently, Emily says she can more easily see the Imago Dei in the people around her. And isn't this the essence of what Jesus taught and embodied throughout His life, death, and resurrection? Church, let's be careful not to dehumanize those we disagree with. In our self-righteousness, we can become the very things we criticize in others and not even know it.

This is kingdom imagination.

I need to challenge myself continually too, on preconceived ideas, judgments, perceptions, and narratives about people. Additionally, I need to have the courage to respectfully challenge people when they express preconceived narratives of other people. It may not change the entire world, but small steps have the possibility of changing us.

For example, what does it look like for you to share a meal with a person you vehemently disagree with on any issue? It might not change your views (or perhaps it might), but it could make you more empathetic. And in the land of a thousand trolls, where we never think we are one but everyone else is, it might help us become more human. It's worth trying to live as a rule of life.

With that mind-set of grace, Emily can hear these raw stories and perspectives. She shared with me about the experience, changing the names of the participants:

**At the table**, in a room full of strangers, when asked about her thoughts on abortion, Janet says, “I’m an atheist, and a liberal-leaning one at that ... I don’t believe God exists. But I’ve always believed in the sanctity of life. I don’t know why, and can’t articulate exactly what it is about it, but there’s something inside me that refuses to let the innocent die.”

**At the table**, when asked point-blank why he “dared” to vote for Trump, Serge, an immigrant who waited ten years to gain entry into the US, responds, he “would have been on the streets if tax laws continued to rise for self-employed citizens under a different presidency. His health insurance costs were choking him out and left him little to no choice in his presidential vote at the ballot.”

**At the table**, Rowan, who grew up in a fundamentalist Christian home, but turned away from the faith in later years, asks, “Why are Christians so adamant about life being lost in the womb but turn a blind eye to suicide rates and the mental health crisis we face today?”

**At the table**, when Aja asks Juan directly if he came to the United States legally, Juan tells a story of his ancestors, his young nephews and nieces who've lost their lives crossing the border for the dream of safety. The room is quiet. The question remains unanswered, and a moment of reverence permeates the room.

The essence for any of these dinners is the desire not to teach, or to pick apart what someone might say, but instead to listen purposefully, actively. To be humble to acknowledge that we may have blind spots and to give space for others to have differing views. Don't be lazy and make assumptions about people. Ask about their stories. Then listen. Genuinely listen. Be humble. Be teachable. Be human. Be a good neighbor.

Emily continued:

Active listening is the practice of taking in someone else's words *before* mentally preparing a response, and it is *not* easy. It's the art of sitting in the mud with someone before telling them to get up and move on. Just sitting. Just listening. If we want to be a people who bring hope and healing to a broken culture, with the message of Jesus, we must be willing to scoot over to make room at the table for the untouchables, no matter who they might be.

I love that visual. This is the kingdom imagination we desperately need. Making space for another. Scooting over, sharing a meal, and

listening. This takes action and discipline on our part. We cannot sit idly by and wait for the world to come to us, fixed. And when it does . . . to think exactly like we do.

Let us take this to heart, and not only on occasions like a carefully orchestrated dinner that is designed to spark conversations about faith, politics, and life with neighbors, family, coworkers, and strangers alike. Let us also embody this philosophy of friendship and fellowship with our family and friends—despite how crazy they may be—on both the holidays and the every days. Let's become keen listeners so we can stop tearing others down and be about building the kingdom of God.

## WHAT'S ON YOUR HEART AND MIND?

1. "As we challenge ourselves to go deep, to be circumspect, to know the issues, it's also of critical importance to get our noses out of books and media and actually engage with others who don't look like us." Consider the last political conversation you had. Were you talking with someone just like yourself, or someone very different?
2. How well do you know and understand your neighbors, coworkers, or community members? Think of two or three of them, and make a list of their top three political concerns. Can you empathize with those concerns even if they're not your own?
3. Have you ever been in a position like Amanda was, where you challenged the status quo and were ridiculed for it? How did you respond?