

The Gospel of the Kingdom and the 2016 Presidential Election

(By Marcus Johnson; adapted from a message preached on October 16th, 2016; LakeRegionBibleChurch.org)

Introduction: This is an unusual election year, as both of the major presidential candidates are highly unpopular, including with people from their own political party. We also have some influential well known Christians who have been endorsing Donald Trump, even though his character, conduct and some of his policies contradict the gospel these leaders are representing. Some Christian leaders are also endorsing Hillary Clinton, but not as many, and usually with less enthusiasm. Serious concerns about both candidates and the church's compromise related to their policies or endorsements of them as candidates are addressed in this article, along with the call to love one another amidst our political differences (including loving the political candidates who we strongly disagree with). With that, the main thrust of this article focuses on how Christians can keep the gospel at the center of our politics, as we repent of our own sins and seek to influence our culture and government accordingly. Four main topics will be addressed, with a charge given for each topic (and more time is given to the first main point because it sets the stage for everything else that is said).

1. Christ's Kingdom and Our Theology: Preach the gospel of the kingdom while standing against cultural or political compromise and idolatry ("preach" here refers to the gospel witness of all believers, not just preachers preaching, and "preach" in a biblical sense demands ongoing repentance and obedience to the gospel we are "preaching"). In order to get our politics right we need to get our theology right. In order to get our theology right, we need to get our view of Jesus and the gospel right. The gospel has a simplicity to it, such that a child, by God's grace, can understand it and believe: God created us in His image for His glory, and He loves us; We are *sinners who have fallen short of living for His glory (*pride, unbelief, love of self, lust, jealousy, racism, oppression of the poor, etc.), and none of us can free ourselves from sin's power or save ourselves from the judgment we deserve; Christ has lived the righteous-sinless life we've failed to live; He died the death we deserve on the cross; He rose bodily from the dead, ascended to heaven, reigns now, and is coming back to judge the living and the dead, and usher in a new heaven and earth; and God will save by His grace all who put their faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

However, the gospel is also the overarching message of the whole Bible, which includes topics such as the true story of salvation history, God's promise of bringing salvation to the world through His chosen people the Jews (Israel) and His faithfulness to that promise, the life-transforming gift of the Holy Spirit for those who are in Christ, adoption into the family of God, and God's eternal kingdom (among other topics). For the purposes of this article, I'll focus on "kingdom" as it relates to the gospel, culture and politics. Jesus taught that the gospel of the "kingdom" will be preached to all nations and then the end of this age will come (Matthew 24:14). The kingdom is the reign of God: His rule that has primarily entered into this world with the first coming of Christ 2000 years ago. We need to guard against preaching an oversimplified gospel, where we preach Jesus as "our personal Lord and Savior" through whom we get to heaven, but fail to call ourselves and the church at large to repent and bow our knee to His reign as an ongoing way of life. In Matthew 24, Jesus emphasizes the gospel of the kingdom amidst the tribulation of this age, knowing that life for the Jews was going to drastically change as the Roman Empire would conquer Jerusalem about 30 years later. Likewise, Jesus was sending His disciples out as His witnesses in a world that would hate them because they represented Him. His focus was nevertheless on the hope and promise that the gospel of the "kingdom" would be preached to all nations, and then the end of this evil world would come. So a message that allows compromise with cultural idols or political power is not the gospel of the kingdom. We need to preach the gospel of the kingdom and guard against cultural or political compromise and idolatry. Two examples are listed below, one concerning liberals and one conservatives, and both directly relate to the current presidential election and recent cultural changes that have taken place very rapidly (partially due to years of compromise by the church).

1) Some liberals have embraced the cultural idol of same sex marriage, something perpetuated by liberal Christian denominations even before same sex marriage became legal. I share this perspective as one who has befriended the gay community in different ways, on a personal level and in ministry. Back in the 1990's, I spent over 400 nights hanging out in the gay bars of Chicago while working with a street ministry that reached out to men involved in homosexual prostitution. This was long before same sex marriage was accepted by the culture or government. In our church, we proactively preach the call to love the LGBTQ community, and to love those in our church who have same sex attraction, while standing against all sexual sins, and against our hypocritical-sinful response to sinners (e.g. the hostility of some Christians in how we have treated the LGBTQ community and the lack of pro-active love, etc.). Some Christians, however, are deceived and have embraced same sex marriage, and others remain silent out of fear of discrimination. With the Democrats and Hillary Clinton, it is full steam ahead with this cultural idol that demands acceptance of same sex marriage and instills hostility against those who won't bow to this idol. Religious discrimination and hostility towards Christians could greatly increase if Clinton is elected. Also, the promotion of same sex marriage, along with pornography and the hook-up culture of heterosexuals, is polluting the sexual health of young people (some of whom would not have engaged in homosexual behavior if it had not been promoted by the culture and government). Along with other factors like unbiblical divorce, and spousal abuse or neglect, this is also harming the already fragile role of marriage and the family.

2) Some conservatives have embraced the idol of relying on or lusting after political power for self-preservation or worldly glory, while lording themselves over the culture we are supposed to be servants to and the people we are called to love. This has led to some famous Christian leaders endorsing or supporting Donald Trump for President, including Jerry Falwell Jr., Franklin Graham, and James Dobson. (Note: endorsing or publicly supporting someone is different than voting for them; this is explained in main point #3 below). Some of these leaders have been deceived and are deceiving the church. They have failed to keep the gospel of the kingdom at the center of their world view. Consequently, they have compromised their faith over the years through the pursuit of political power or trusting in it, and by exalting some issues over others, and have quickly endorsed a candidate who blatantly contradicts the gospel they represent by his behavior and some of his policies.

Trump has a track record of preying on women sexually, publicly making racists, sexist and self-glorifying comments in his political campaign, and some of his policies reflect these sins (how he handles immigration related to Mexicans or Muslims and how he talks about them, etc.). Some Christian leaders have been downplaying the wickedness of these sins in order to justify supporting him in the hopes of preventing a Clinton presidency. Some think he has had a change of heart and has become a Christian (which I hope is true), but his ongoing actions to this day show otherwise. Likewise, his running mate, Mike Pence, is a self-identifying evangelical, and Pence has publicly denied or downplayed some of Trump's sins; sins which we have record of Trump committing. So here we have it: some evangelicals are standing against same-sex marriage while promoting a candidate who preys on women sexually – and we expect the culture to take the church and our gospel message seriously? Also, some are promoting Trump because of his support for religious freedom, but religious freedom for whom? It is both hypocritical and a major hindrance to our gospel witness to endorse a candidate because he will promote our religious freedom, when that same candidate said he wants to ban all Muslims from the country. Some horrible things are being done in the name of Islam, and we should proactively stand against this. But Trump's oversimplified approach, combined with calling Mexicans rapists and so forth, is not the presidential or American way to go about protecting our religious freedom or our national borders. This type of self-serving, fear-based, double-standard hypocrisy corrupts our witness, causes some in the younger generation to consider abandoning the faith, and it spreads compromise in the church as denying self and taking up our cross take a back set to a self-righteous, self-preserving, compromised-Christianity. Preaching the gospel of the kingdom calls us to repent of such sins.

2. The 2016 Election and Our Response: Lament and Repent - Pray and Rejoice. **Lament:** grieve before the Lord and with one another over where we are at as a nation, including our sins and the sins within the church. How have we gotten to this point where our two major presidential candidates have such serious character flaws? **Repent:** Biblical lament includes repentance. Two Examples: 1) Highly respected conservative theologian Wayne Grudem repented of his earlier endorsement of Trump, dated 10-09-16 (www.townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem; this article also includes why he cannot support Clinton). You may not have heard of Grudem, but his book Systematic Theology was endorsed by famous godly Christians such as the late Chuck Colson, J.I. Packer and John Piper. (Update: shortly after repenting, Grudem unfortunately wrote an article dated 10-16-16 encouraging people to vote for Trump based on his policies). 2) Do we have love in our hearts for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton? Part of loving them includes standing against their sins. But as we do so, it should be with love in our hearts for both of them. Peter calls us to honor all people including those in authority (1Pe 2:17). Do you despise one or the other, or both of them? We must not let the love of our hearts grow cold, which happens when evil increases in the culture (Mt 24:13).

Pray: "Do we live like we believe in prayer?" (a quote from evangelism professor Lyle Dorsett). Do we complain more than we pray about our politicians, government and so forth? Some in the culture mock the importance of prayer, but we are called to pray for our governing authorities and for all people. The emphasis by many in the church on who we should vote for and who we are against, compared to how much we pray, is not in line with Scripture. Pray for God to work in power in our government, culture and for our gospel witness. **Rejoice:** Probably Clinton or Trump will be our next president; and God will still be on the throne; and the mission of the church will go forth; and the joy of the Lord will be our strength; and Jesus is coming back.

3. The 2016 Election and Our Vote: Vote according to our convictions and conscience, in light of God's Sovereignty and God's Gospel. Some of us might not be citizens or may not be able to vote for different reasons, but the principles below are still relevant for all because they address how we think and talk about politics and bear witness to the gospel. If you think you should vote for Trump or Clinton, and can do so without compromising your Christian convictions, then do so (voting for someone does not mean you agree with all of their policies or conduct, etc.). Some people are enthusiastically supporting one of the major candidates or the other. Probably most Christians are concerned about either choice to put it mildly. Some will vote for one or the other primarily out of opposition to the candidate they are not voting for. They are not endorsing a candidate, but voting for one of them as the lesser of two evils, or the best option. They are also not compromising their convictions or conscience because they are not voting out of fear or selfishness, but based on biblical wisdom and godly counsel, and believe that voting for one of these two major candidates is the best choice to make.

Many Christians, however, cannot in good conscience vote for either Clinton or Trump. Some Christians cannot vote for Trump. They might appreciate that he has shaken up the self-serving Republican establishment, but are appalled by his racism, sexism, exploitation of women, and discrimination against Mexicans and Muslims. However, Hillary Clinton is not a viable option for many believers either, in spite of her wealth of experience and long standing service. Along with our concern about the religious discrimination Christians are increasingly facing (as explained above), Clinton's pro-choice policies along with other serious flaws in her character and judgment make her an unacceptable choice for many of us. Our church, like many others, preaches and models love for women who've had abortions; we actively and personally support women we know who choose to have babies in difficult circumstances; we seek to disciple our young people in a way that prevents teenage pregnancies; we support pro-life ministries which offer non-coerced, practical support to mothers and fathers; and we seek to be a political voice for the voiceless unborn child. While some of the positions promoted by Democrats are pro-life friendly (related to maternity leave and health insurance laws for pregnancies, etc.), Clinton's overall pro-choice agenda would only bring further devastating

consequences upon the already most vulnerable and oppressed people group in our country since 1973: the unborn child.

So if you cannot vote for Clinton or Trump without compromising your convictions, then don't. Vote for a 3rd party, independent or write-in candidate. Some Christian leaders say it's a wasted vote to vote for someone who can't win. I strongly disagree: that's an intellectually flawed argument and it is theological inconsistent with Scripture's teaching related to righteousness and trusting in our sovereign God. I'm not saying this is or isn't the best option this year, but am strongly disagreeing with those who think that option is fundamentally flawed in and of itself. Vote in light of God's Sovereignty: Trust that doing the right thing and persevering over time will honor God even if the results are slow in coming, and even if this means making ourselves more vulnerable regarding religious discrimination (either because we won't compromise with same sex marriage or we won't vote for a candidate because of his wicked character, even though his policies might help protect our religious liberties, etc.). Before Christ came to earth, the nation of Israel had a habit of committing idolatry and putting her trust in ungodly nations or powers, and this did not end well for her (being conquered and taken into captivity). While we have a long way to go, the progress made with civil rights over the last 50 years came at an accelerated rate compared to centuries gone by, partially because many African Americans persevered without getting to see the fruits of their labor. Do not exalt the need to vote for a candidate who can realistically win over your obedience to Christ (as you understand obedience related to voting).

Vote in light of God's Gospel: 1) When you vote, ask yourself, how will my vote affect my gospel witness? If we are voting out of fear, or based on a few issues while ignoring others, or because we've embraced cultural or political idols, our voting is not bearing witness to the gospel of the kingdom (which calls us to trust in the reign of Christ, not taking matters into our own hands, and to submit to His reign in all areas of life). 2) When you talk about the election, make sure your gospel witness comes through louder than your passions for certain issues or your promotion or defense of the candidate you are voting for, and do not downplay, ignore or justify the flaws of that candidate you are supporting.

4. A Divided-Troubled Nation and Our Gospel Witness: Model and promote godly civility with listening ears, joyful-loving hearts and gospel hope. One of the great needs of the hour is to model and promote godly civility (respect and peace amidst our differences and without compromising). The church should be the institution that leads us in doing so, starting with our love for one another amidst our political differences. Have a listening ear: listen to other perspectives and don't dominate the conversation. Listen because you want to hear where that person is coming from, rather than simply waiting for your turn to talk. Have joyful-loving hearts: we have joy and we love people we disagree with, in spite of our current trials, because we know Jesus. We get discouraged about this election, but our joy and love should flow nonetheless. Do all of this with gospel hope: we proclaim the gospel of the kingdom - Jesus reigns now and He is coming back, and this world is not our home (we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom). He has all authority in heaven and on earth, over Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. He is with us to the end of the age, while our God works all things for the good of those who love Him. He is coming back to usher in the fullness of His reign here on earth, to bring justice for the poor and oppressed, to do away with Satan and all evil, and we will reign with Him for ever unto His eternal glory. So let us stand against cultural or political compromise and idolatry, as we preach the gospel of the kingdom until the King returns. Amen.

5. Other Perspectives. Here are some online articles for your reference. They represent different Christian perspectives, some of which I do not agree with, but they offer insightful perspectives to consider. If clicking on the title does not take you to the article, paste the title and author in the search box of your web browser (or on the website listed with it).

[Seeking Clarity in this Confusing Election Season: 10 Thoughts](#) by Kevin DeYoung (www.theGospelCoalition.org) – very helpful insights about voting and church unity amidst our differences.

[Why Evangelicals are Divided Over Donald Trump](#) by Joe Carter (www.theGospelCoalition.org) - an excellent theological summary explaining the foundation behind *two of the main perspectives held by conservative Christians, related to this year's election & politics in general (*emphasizing either future supreme court nominees or our gospel witness). My article above reflects the "Witness Side" perspective listed in this article.

[Defeating Hillary is not Worth Sacrificing Our Witness](#) by Julie Roys (www.JulieRoys.com) – a powerful article condemning the downplaying of Trump's sins at the expense of our gospel witness.

[This Election is a Matter of Life & Death](#) by Samuel Rodriguez (www.nhclc.org) – a strong, holistic pro-life view based on "the image of God" related to abortion, immigration, racism & criminal justice. See the "[7 Directives](#)" tab at the top of their webpage for more insightful articles.

[How to Talk to Your Parents about the Election](#) by Chelsea Patterson (www.theGospelCoalition.org) – some good insights in how to discuss our political differences, sometimes held by the older and younger generations.

[On Endorsing Political Candidates](#) by Erwin Lutzer (www.moodymedia.org) – good pastoral insights about the problems with pastors & Christian leaders endorsing candidates.

[On Abortion & Racism: Why there is a Greater Evil in this Election](#) by Thabiti Anyabwile (www.theGospelCoalition.org) – powerful pastoral insights related to the horror of racism and the downplaying of these sins & consequences by some who are adamantly pro-life, sometimes at the expense of other issues. I think he somewhat overreacts to the flaws within the dominant conservative perspective: flaws he rightly confronts. Anyabwile acknowledges this overreaction himself, and his insights are more than worth the read.

[Dr. James Dobson Endorses Trump for President](#) by Religion News Service (religionnews.com) – Dobson emphasizes some very important issues, but unfortunately endorses a candidate and neglects other important issues often times downplayed by conservatives (see the Anyabwile article for an alternative perspective).

[Why I Don't Think You Must Vote for the Lesser of Two Evils](#) by Dan Doriani (www.theGospelCoalition.org) – Summary: "Thoughtful Christians will come to different conclusions on this, but it is clear in Scripture that God's people often do what is right and leave the results to the Lord of history."