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Engaging Democracy: The Trouble with Trump

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Abstract

In its original version, this brief essay was delivered as a talk on the Northwestern College campus. The author reflects on Christian evangelical engagement in politics in “The Age of Trump”—as a believer, a political scientist, and a former candidate for state legislative office. Love, he argues—God’s love for us, and our love for God—is the key. As God’s love for each and all was made manifest in Christ on the cross, evangelicals should not lose sight of such love in engaging in public debate and policy-making. Insofar as uncritical evangelical support for Trump is the case, that is politics in and of the world. Evangelical political engagement needs instead to be done at the foot of the cross.

About the Author

Dr. VanDerWerff teaches American politics, public policy, religion and politics, and constitutional law. He also serves as the pre-law adviser to students. A Northwestern College graduate, he holds a doctorate in American politics and public administration. Research interests include religion and politics and political theology. He is a member of both the American Political Science Association and Christians in Political Science.

Engaging Democracy: The Trouble with Trump

by Jeff VanDerWerff, Ph.D.

A little over a year ago—November 8, 2016—Donald J. Trump shocked the political punditry by winning the presidency; it seems to me there might be some value in briefly reflecting on that campaign and some of what has happened in its remarkable wake. While the race for the White House proved unprecedented in ways, it not surprisingly grew rather heated as zealous partisans went to the mat on behalf of their respective candidate or cause.

As significantly, a latent division within American evangelicalism resulted in a bitter split emerging, which, in turn, laid bare a host of idols we in the church appear to worship. My hope is that the experience of the church at Ephesus, the example of Saint Paul, and the exacting cross of Christ might help us thoughtfully examine our actions in public life as citizens not only of a particular nation-state, but also—and more importantly—the kingdom of God.

For the uninitiated, professors at Northwestern College, when approaching tenure, are required to submit an essay exploring a philosophical or theological question in their discipline, examining it in light of one’s Christian faith. My efforts towards that end a few years back essentially made a preliminary, even normative, plea that primarily concerned itself with the approach as well as the attitude adopted in attempting to be in, but not of, the world of politics. To this day, I remain deeply interested in this foundational concern over civic engagement and *how* we as followers of Jesus should behave in public life, a particularly pertinent question given the so-called “Age of Trump” in which we live.

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Only from the Perspective of the Cross

It seems to me disciples of Jesus are called to take up the cross of Christ—right? To my mind, this essentially means choosing the way of love. N.T. Wright observes, “Only from the perspective of the cross, shattering as it was to Jesus’ followers then as it should be now, can any view of [public life]...claim to be Christian.”¹ How might this admittedly strange idea of engaging democracy in this way—politics at the foot of the cross—challenge our current participatory practices, individually and collectively?

What we know about God and what we do for God, of course, have a way of getting broken apart in our lives, at least they do in mine. As Eugene Peterson in *The Message* notes, the apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesians, exuberantly explores “what Christians believe about God, and then, like a surgeon skillfully setting a compound fracture, ‘sets’ this belief in God into our behavior before God so that the bones—belief and behavior—knit together.”²

Alerted to this reality, these so-called “fractures” are noticeable everywhere, not only in our personal lives but also throughout society and the broader culture. In considering just a few examples from public life, it appears to confirm that belief and behavior remain very much in tension and at odds with one another. Given the overwhelming identification of white evangelicals—values voters—with conservative and/or Republican issues and ideals [81% voted for Trump last year], it is also interesting to note the images with which we are associated.³

¹ N.T. Wright, “The New Testament and the ‘State’,” *Themelios* 16, no. 1 (1990): 13.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: Remix—The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2011), 2122.

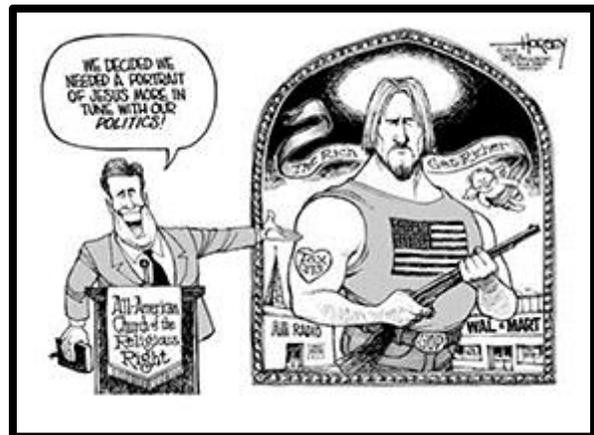
³ Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martinez, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” *Pew Research Center*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

Political Cartoons, Characterizations, and Caricatures

Please don’t misunderstand. I get why most of my fellow evangelicals—many friends as well as family members—felt their only choice when voting for president last November was between the proverbial lesser of two evils; that, however, does not excuse the largely unreserved support for or defense of Trump by many of those same voters a year later, does it? A less than flattering view of evangelical Christians, of course, predates this curious relationship with the current president. Consider the message—both explicit and implicit—in the drawings depicted by two-time Pulitzer Prize winning editorial cartoonists Don Wright and David Horsey (one of my all-time favorite artist-commentators):



Political cartoon by Don Wright.
Image from *Palm Beach Post*.



Political cartoon by David Horsey.
Image from *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Recall too the *God is Still Speaking* series. What should we make of, at the time, a very controversial promotional plug and its implicit criticism—intentionally or not—by the mainline United Church of Christ of other less progressive denominations? Several television stations refused to air what was dubbed the “Bouncer” ad, deeming its message too political or

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provocative. The ad claimed, “God created all humanity, that there should be no outsiders, and that the UCC attempts to be inclusive in a country where some minorities have been systematically excluded.” Two bouncers are shown at the doors of a church barring those from entering depending on their race, class, disability, or sexual orientation.⁴

Undoubtedly, these characterizations and cartoons are not entirely accurate. They’ve misperceived reality, at least in part, thus perpetuating stereotypes if not creating caricatures. And yet we should not be too quick to discount the perspective they offer us. For one last example—a bit closer to home, albeit last decade—let us recall the retention election of Iowa district court judge Jeff Neary, who granted a dissolution of marriage to two women and thus drew the ire of many citizens in northwest Iowa as well as social conservatives beyond this corner of the state.

Revisiting this rather contentious campaign is not meant to relitigate the various legal decisions around which it centered; rather it is to take issue instead with the particular flyer above. It should be noted, this particular effort/tactic was spearheaded by two explicitly Christian organizations, the Iowa Family PAC and the Judicial Accountability Group. My primary point—besides the fact that the flyer was misleading at best and disingenuous at worst—relates to the image the “I’m watching you...” panel depicts: an angry child? Maybe, just maybe, we should be more concerned about who is watching us?

⁴ A subsequent commercial in the so-called “comma campaign” or series referred to as the “Ejector” ad hit upon similar themes. Both can be viewed at the following link: http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking_ads_television-ads.

Vote Your Values

Every 4-6 years, **Iowans** vote whether to or not to retain **Governor-appointed judges**. Iowa voters have the responsibility to hold judges accountable.

Judge Neary IGNORED Iowa Law when he granted a divorce to a lesbian couple.

“Only a marriage between a man and a woman is valid.”
Iowa Code Section 595.2

On November 2, you’ll be asked this question about local Judge Neary:

Shall Judge Neary be retained?

Yes: *Judges should define marriage as they see fit.*

NO: *The definition of marriage has remained the same for thousands of years. Iowa law supports it, and so should our judges.*

For more information including complete legal documents, visit:

www.jagiowa.com

Paid for by: Iowa Family PAC

I’m watching you...

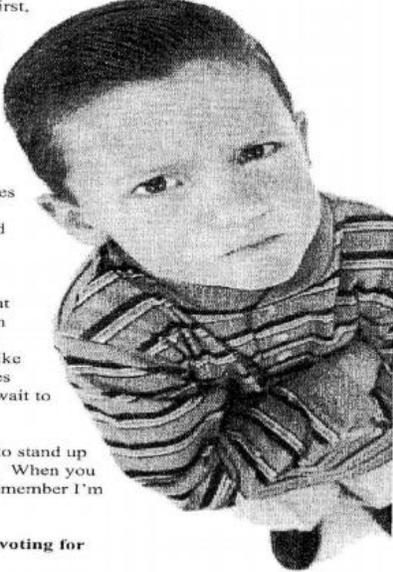
Lately, it seems you’re upset with judges a lot. First, it was the ten commandments and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Then, recently I heard you talking about judges recognizing “same-sex” marriages. Are judges making laws? In school, we learned that’s the job of the legislative branch.

The good news is that Iowans get to vote on which judges stay in office. So, it looks like you get to hold judges accountable. I can’t wait to be an grown-up!

You always told me to stand up for what I believe in. When you vote in November, remember I’m watching you.

Make me proud by voting for our family values.



Examples of ads that ran in Iowa newspapers for the 2010 retention election of Judge Jeffrey Neary. Image from the author and originally from Iowa Family PAC.

Have We Lost Our First Love?

This seems a good time to briefly consider the witness of the Ephesians, not to mention the apologetics or approach of Paul. Let’s start with the lament of Revelation 2:

Write this to Ephesus...I see what you’ve done, your hard work, your refusal to quit. I know you can’t stomach evil, that you weed out apostolic pretenders. I know your persistence, your courage in my cause, that you never wear out. But you walked away from your first love—why? What’s going on with you, anyway? Do you have any idea how far you’ve fallen? Turn back! Recover your dear early love...⁵

⁵ Revelation 2:1-5 (The Message [MSG]).

The church of Ephesus is commended for many things (working hard, being patient, resisting sin, critically examining the claims of false prophets, and suffering patiently), but these good things should spring from our love for Jesus Christ. The Ephesians had apparently lost their “first love” and as such were behaving more out of a sense of legalism, duty or obligation.

Jesus describes this first love in Matthew 22, something, by the way, that the Ephesians were once commended for originally:

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it:

‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.”⁶

I used to work as an administrative director at a great little ministry that paraphrased this verse rather succinctly: “Love God. Love Others. Nothing Else Matters.” Granted, this is theologically simplistic, but it gets at the gist—some might say heart—of the gospel message.

The apostle Paul captures the essence of these commands in another one of his epistles, this time to the disciples in Colossae. Once again, Eugene Peterson provides some perspective:

The way [Paul] makes the argument is as significant as the argument he makes. . . . [C]laims about the uniqueness of Christ [were] common enough. But such claims about Jesus [then, and now I’d argue] are frequently made with an arrogance that is completely incompatible with Jesus . . . Paul [however] . . . is not arrogant . . . [H]e

⁶ Matthew 22:37-40 (MSG).

argues from a position of rooted humility. He writes with the energies of a most considerate love.⁷

Let me reiterate: how we make an argument matters as much as the argument being made. Rooted humility. Considerate love. In reflecting on the beliefs and behaviors evangelicals have demonstrated in the public square by virtue of our participation in the on-going culture war, *is there any evidence that we—like the early church at Ephesus—have lost our first love?*

Here’s another question worth pondering: are partisan loyalties or ideological convictions trumping [no pun intended] the cross of Christ and its political implications for us? Let me be clear. I’m all for spirited involvement and championing a cause or candidate, but the way we act, how we behave, the attitude or approach we adopt is as important—maybe more so—than the message we share, the stand we take or the things we believe.

The Example of Jesus is, as Always, Instructive

Living amidst the fervor and fanaticism of nationalist revolution that was first century Palestine, Christ chose another way. Moreover, as N.T. Wright contends “Jesus saw as a pagan corruption *the very desire to fight paganism itself.*”⁸ Christ’s message could not have been clearer: “the kingdom, the rule, the government of God is on God’s terms. You love enemies. You forgive. You fulfill the law. You seek justice and righteousness for others. You are meek,

⁷ Peterson, *The Message*, 2142.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 89; italicized in the original.

rather than self-assertive. You go the second mile. You forgive debts. This is God’s way. . . . [W]hat are you going to do with it?”⁹

Richard Bauckham claims that “the key to the way Jesus actualized God’s rule is [in] his loving identification with people.”¹⁰ While this solidarity knew no limits, Christ did not identify with all people in the same way. Nor did he do so with them solely as individuals: “he also appreciated the extent to which they belonged to specific social groups.”¹¹ Jesus possessed a special concern for the marginalized of society (i.e., those who experienced relative exclusion from the mainstream, whether socially, economically, or religiously). The epitome of this loving identification is found, of course, in the cross of Jesus.

If, then, “the cross is the surest, truest and deepest window on the very heart and character of the living and loving God,”¹² followers of Jesus must bring the cross to bear on public life. It would be nice, if as Nike tells us, we’d just do it! But it’s not that easy, is it? As such, I suspect N.T. Wright is on to something when he urges us to “live in prayer at the place of pain in this world.”¹³ This may seem an odd practice for anyone familiar with the rough-and-tumble world of power politics, but as St. Theresa reminds us: “prayer . . . consists not in speaking a lot, but in loving a lot.”¹⁴

⁹ Alan Storkey, “The Bible’s Politics,” in *Witness to the World*, ed. David Peterson (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternost Press, 1999), 89; italics mine.

¹⁰ Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 143.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹² Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴ Charles De Foucauld, “Silent Pilgrimage to God—Reflections: Quotations to Stir the Heart and Mind,” in *Christianity Today* 46, no. 10 (2002): 47.

Trump is Not Our Savior

Andrew Bacevich at *The American Conservative* correctly observes that anyone who thinks impeachment or removal of Trump will restore a lost sense of normalcy has not been paying attention to how the president first prevailed over a slew of primary challengers and was then swept into office to the chagrin of not a few members of the GOP. As such, “those who imagine that Trump’s removal will put things right are deluding themselves. To persist in thinking that the president defines the problem is to commit an error of the first order.”¹⁵

The trouble with Trump is not that he is the cause of our incivility; it is rather that he is the consequence of it. It’s not Trump, but Trumpism that ails us, and “if we have an ounce of sense, the Trump presidency will cure us once and for all of any illusion that from the White House comes redemption.”¹⁶

It is high time we reimagine participatory practices; the confident pluralism outlined by John Inazu, for instance, appears to hold promise.¹⁷ Bacevich believes any effort must start with the following question: “what’s the point of being an American?”¹⁸ I’d rather ask: why are you an evangelical? Undoubtedly, each answer potentially produces tension when considering the other question; that’s to be expected for citizens of not only the U.S. but the kingdom of heaven.

Followers of Jesus should go about engaging democracy in both senses of this wonderful phrase: get involved, engage, but do so in a way that contributes to the common good and makes

¹⁵ Andrew Bacevich, “Slouching Towards Mar-a-Lago,” *The American Conservative*, August 8, 2017, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/slouching-toward-mar-a-lago/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ John D. Inazu, *Confidant Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Bacevich, “Slouching Towards Mar-a-Lago.”

public life more attractive or appealing. An all too frequent tendency for many Christians is that in our efforts to realize order, freedom and equality—to Make America Great Again—through participation in the political process, we often denigrate or demonize those who oppose us. The world will—or at least should—only know we are Christians by our love, grounded as it ought to be, in the politics of the cross.