

How Can a Christian Think About This Election?

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When it comes to American politics and presidents, I'm generally not one given to hyperbole or alarmism. So it was unusual for me to say to my teenage son a few weeks ago that I believed that 2020 would be **the most important election in America in my lifetime**. So much more than policy matters feels at stake.

It is also unusual for me to write about such things. I'm struggling to remember if I ever really have directly addressed Christian discipleship generally as it relates to politics and elections much at all in my 25 years of ministry, and am drawing a blank.

This year feels different, and as part of Coracle's "[Christian Discipleship and the 2020 Election](#)" initiative, I'm grateful for the opportunity to put into words some reflections on "*How Can A Christian Think About This Election?*"

Right off the bat let me start by saying, what follows is how I, Bill Haley, as an individual Christian, am thinking about this election. I don't put it out there with a spirit of "Everyone must agree with me," and in fact, I would expect there to be some sharp disagreement from some thoughtful, faithful Christian people. And that's OK. For some, I hope this may be helpful and inspire prayer, and for others, I hope it offers at least some food for thought and also inspire prayer. In matters of politics, I believe it is possible for good people to disagree. My job is not to convince people how to vote, mine is to be faithful— as a Christian first and an American citizen second— with the stewardship of my vote.

What follows, after some brief introductory comments, are some of the major areas that I'm thinking about as this election draws near, including some thoughts on America, the primacy of the Kingdom of God, being completely pro-life, our two-party system, White Evangelicalism, why this election matters, and what happens on November 4th and after.



A little background

I am a Christian. My denominational affiliation is Anglican. My nationality is American. My political affiliation remains independent, as it always has been. Notice there is only one statement of identity there, that of being a Christian. All the others are far less important than that one thing. This means my primary hope is not in my church tradition, country, or political party or elected leadership.

It's worth noting that I've traveled to around 90 countries, spending longer stints in some, and this no-doubt informs my thinking, as does having lived for quite a few years in inner-city Washington DC before moving to rural Virginia.

Some thoughts on America

There are **many things that I love about our country**, including the grit of those who settled in this land, the history of our founding as an independent nation, the checks and balances of our governmental system, the foundational aspirations to freedom and justice, our aspirations of being a democracy, an engrained entrepreneurial spirit and optimism, our being a nation of immigrants then and now, certain significant positive contributions globally (not least of which is World War II and [PEPFAR](#)) and an orientation to be a force for global good, and a general cultural appreciation of my own faith tradition.

At the same time and equally important, **our nation was founded on and persisted in grotesque evil and sin**. This is particularly manifest in our attempted genocide of the original inhabitants of this land, forced relocation of the survivors, and long-standing racial bias against Native Americans. Our country's original sin is also manifest in the enslavement and legalized and culturally accepted oppression of African Americans for the vast majority of our nation's history. Our country was founded with a firm, articulated, and legally-enshrined belief in white supremacy, which had horrific consequences for millions upon millions of people and which persists, like a cancer in our collective blood. And for all the positive contributions we've made in the world, it is also true that we've done a lot of damage in the world for our perceived national or personal gain, whether in Central America, Congo, Viet Nam, Iraq, Palestine, or elsewhere.

All that to say I love my country, I grieve for my country, and will always hope and work for her to right her wrongs, live up to her ideals, and live into her potential. These things can and must be held in tension. This is my duty as an American citizen more than as an expression of my Christianity, since for me as for all Christians, our primary allegiance lies elsewhere.

The Primacy of the Kingdom of God

America as a country has not always existed, and as an empire it will not last forever, nor will it last as a country either. God's Kingdom came before it, transcends it, is here (Luke 10.9), will come in its fullness, and will last forever. (Rev 11.15) **God's hope for the world is not America, it is his Church** in all its various expressions around the world, working on God's behalf while longing for the day when Christ will return and consummate his reign as King. At Christ's return, all national [borders](#) will fade, including ours. Thus my fundamental hope and orientation is not on the preservation of America as a country or an ideal but rather living as a citizen of heaven first (Phil. 3.20), even while I have breath as a citizen of this country (for only 80 years maybe?). It is so much more important, and long-lasting, to be a good Christian than a good American. America is not where my hope lies.

This conviction of ultimate importance immediately adjusts the relative importance of particular presidential leadership at any given time. What is four or eight years in God's time, what even are decades? (2 Pet. 3.8)

Still, the presidential office in a given moment is one of significant and practical consequence for people living now and perhaps for a generation or two. So, when I think about how I'm going to vote, I'm not thinking primarily in religious terms, but rather as it relates to how it will impact the lives of people, the general common good, and the flourishing of all citizens of our country and places where American influence reaches.



America as an independent country has never been, should never be, and doubtfully ever will be, a theocracy, where the laws of the land are understood to be of divine origin and understood to be implemented and enforced on God's behalf. As such, Christian theocracy for America is not the goal. To expect my government to legislate things that completely comport to my Christian worldview (even if I think that would be societally beneficial) is misguided and has a misplaced hope.



It is of note to me how little guidance the New Testament (and even less in the Gospels) gives about how Christians are to be a citizen of one's own country. There are few verses in Romans 13 and some guidance we can glean by implication elsewhere. Meanwhile, there is an immense amount about how Christians are to pursue personal holiness, how we are to treat fellow believers and people generally, how we are to serve with love and pray, and how external distinctions are quite shallow compared to the unity we have by sharing the spirit of Jesus. It is as if New Testament believers had very little concern about political and national affairs, as their attention was significantly elsewhere, notably in spreading the good news about Jesus, living in the fellowship of believers, worshipping God and praying, and serving the needy in their midst. Simply, from the biblical record anyway, **early Christians didn't seem too bothered or distracted by national or political events.**

It is also worth noting that for the New Testament writers and Early Church (and this may explain some of the above paragraph), the thought of actually participating in the political process by having a vote would have never occurred to the vast majority of them.

Completely Pro-Life

I am against abortion in the vast majority of cases, as I believe and the church teaches that human life begins at conception. That said, I seek to be completely and coherently pro-life before a person is born and after they are born to the natural end of their days.

[I preached on this](#) at length at [The Falls Church Anglican](#) in January, 2017, and said then, “We Christians today want to do a great job of being completely pro-life, because our Lord is the Lord of Life at every stage—unborn, born, young, middle-aged, and elderly. I want to say it again, I love saying it: **each and every human being has equal and infinite value at every stage of life.** The unborn matter, the born matter, the elderly matter. If there's a threat to the life of any and each one of these, Christians are those most called to defend and protect them.”

My observation is that many pro-life Christians do a good job advocating for the sanctity of life for the unborn and oftentimes the elderly, but much less so for those whose ages are in between, which of course is a significant population.

I'm so very grateful for the Roman Catholic Church, and particularly its clearly articulated "[Catholic Social Teaching](#)" (and a short version [here](#)) which to me is gorgeously cogent, coherent, and consistent while it is deeply rooted in Scripture, the writings of the saints, and the centuries-old Catholic Magisterium and its contemporary expressions. I've said often in voice and now here in writing that I wish that the Evangelical church would simply adopt it whole cloth, be done with the many internal debates on these topics, and let's all get down to work.

There is not just one, or two, pro-life issues that we must consider when voting for a president. There are in fact quite a few. One of them is racism. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote their pastoral letter against racism "[Open Wide Your Hearts](#)" in late 2018 and clearly affirmed, "We unequivocally state that racism is a life issue." (p28).

Pope Francis wrote in 2018 in his encyclical letter [Gaudete et Exsultate](#) (emphasis mine),

"Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. **Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born**, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and *every form* of rejection."

To be a single issue voter on the issue of abortion, as seems to be the case for some, is to miss the larger reality of the sanctity of each human life at every stage of life. This [page](#) from a Catholic (albeit liberal leaning) group of nuns has a helpful list of various pro-life issues and where our two current presidential candidates stand on them.

As a Christian, I will seek to vote as best I can from a completely, coherently pro-life ethic, realizing (and grieving) that neither of the two major parties is completely pro-life to the standards of our faith.



It is sometimes [said](#) that abortion rates fall more quickly under Democratic presidents than Republican presidents. This is not entirely true. In [fact](#), since 1984, abortions rates have generally and consistently diminished regardless of which party occupied the White House. In other words, a person can care deeply about abortion, and the party occupying the White House isn't going to make that much of a difference. That is to say, a person can be pro-life with regards to abortion and still vote in good conscience for a Democratic presidential candidate.

Further, it is worth pointing out that the Republican party is hardly agreed on being fully anti-abortion. From [here](#) in 2019, "Republicans are roughly evenly divided, with 50% saying they do not want to see Roe v. Wade completely overturned and 48% saying they would like the decision tossed out."



My denominational affiliation is Anglican, in the [Anglican Church in North America](#). Anglicanism has a very rich history of social activism for the common good, and at its brightest moments has comfortably held a completely pro-life ethic. I gave a talk in 2016 for the ACNA on "[To Be Anglican: Our Past and Path for Justice](#)", and unpacked Anglican history specifically in areas of justice as well as the phrase from our current canons, "All members and Clergy are called to protect and respect the sanctity of every human life from conception **to** natural death." I focused on that little and huge word 'to', which represents the majority of the human population.

Our (very limited) Two-Party System

In other democracies, there are a multitude of choices for legitimate political parties. The United States is not there yet, for the worse I think. Currently, we have two major parties– Republican and Democrat.

After the 2016 election, Philip Yancey [distilled](#) a sermon from Tim Keller along these lines, and the whole article is worth a read.

"In a sermon to New York's Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Tim Keller set forth eight characteristics of early Christians, who lived under a Roman government far less congenial to Christianity than is the modern United States. They followed the following principles:

- Opposed bloodthirsty sports and violent entertainment, such as gladiator games
- Opposed serving in the military
- Opposed abortion and infanticide
- Empowered women
- Opposed sex outside of marriage and homosexual activity
- Encouraged radical support for the poor
- Encouraged the mixing of races and classes
- Insisted that Jesus is the only way to salvation

"Go back over that list and apply the label liberal or conservative. Half of the principles reflect traditionally conservative values, and half traditionally liberal—precisely Keller's point."

In other words, **neither party currently in America is completely Christian.** Neither party is God's party. You can be a faithful Christian and vote for either party, knowing that neither of your options completely reflects your convictions or values or faith.

For my part, while I'll vote between my two options this go around, I am once again longing for a legitimate third party option.

It goes without saying that none of our presidential candidates are or will be perfect. No presidential candidate warrants any Messianic hope, for there is only one Messiah. As we considered in Coracle's recent seminar on "[The Moral Burden of Voting](#)", this gives us the ability to vote for someone even while we have some (perhaps) grave misgivings.

White Evangelicalism

The statistic that bothers me the most is not that [81%](#) of White Evangelicals voted for President Trump in 2016 or that support from this constituency has remained somewhat steady.

Rather it is this from [here](#):

“In 2011, only 30% of white evangelical Protestants in the USA would support a politician who commits immoral acts in their personal life. Five years later, the statistic has changed drastically. A new survey shows that 72% of white evangelical Protestants in the USA ‘now believe elected officials can behave ethically even if they have committed transgressions in their personal lives.’”

Ed Stetzer of *Christianity Today* [says](#) it well (emphasis mine),

“The people of God, who are called to hold to the highest standard of morals and ethics, now rank as the highest group percentage-wise of those who say that these things don’t necessarily matter. *This is a problem of huge proportions.* With such a swing happening in a short period of time, we have to consider the surrounding circumstances. As such, it is hard not to conclude that for many this has happened so that they could justify voting for Trump... That’s the definition of selling out.”

As a Christian and as a citizen, I remain convicted that **character and integrity matters in leadership and in elected leadership**. Character matters in every elected office, and especially the highest office in the land. Were this the only filter applied to the decision of November 4 (and it could be), the choice would be easy, even if unsatisfying.

Evangelicalism as a movement has forfeited our legitimate ability ever again to say that a person’s private behavior has any bearing on their public service, and this is very disappointing.

For what? Simply, for power.

In January 2016, then-candidate Trump gave a [speech](#) at a conservative Christian college in Iowa and said, “Christianity will have power. If I’m there, you’re going to have plenty of power, you don’t need anybody else.”

The parallels to the temptation of Jesus in the desert are striking at least, if not chilling. Satan as bluntly tempted Jesus with worldly power (Luke 4.5-8). Jesus rejected the offer. White Evangelicalism in America has not, and in that way we have failed to follow the example of our Lord whose lifestyle was to give up power (Phil. 2.5-11), thus painfully compromising the church’s witness for a long time to come. By aligning so closely with our current president, Christians run the

great risk (if it's not already too late) of making Christ less credible, and this is deeply painful and even tragic.

Repentance is called for, and acts of repentance (Luke 3.8).



Contemporary American Evangelicalism began with noble and, I think, rather pure intent in the 1950s under the leadership of Billy Graham, Harold John Ockenga, and Carl Henry among others. Where the conservative expression of Christianity that came before it, known as Fundamentalism, took a “Christ against culture” posture, Evangelicalism sought a more positive and constructive engagement with culture for the sake of spreading the gospel. It did not start as a political movement.

This began to change in the early 1970s, particularly when *Roe v. Wade* was passed by the Supreme Court. Under the leadership of Jerry Falwell Sr. and others, the language of “The Moral Majority” began to emerge— an effort to galvanize a disparate Evangelical voice into a political bloc and force, with particular concerns around bioethics, sexual morality, and protecting religious freedom for Christians. In some ways this has been effectual, and in other ways not.

These past four years have made it clear that some significant part of Evangelicalism truly has been co-opted for political purposes, and that the spiritual goals and language that accompany it have functioned as a thinning veneer for other purposes.

The prominence, influence, and then fall of Jerry Falwell Jr. is particularly illustrative.

On September 26, 2020, there was a large gathering on the Mall in Washington DC called [“The Return”](#), organized by [Jonathan Cahn](#) and led by many significant figures of a certain faction of Evangelicalism purportedly just to pray and repent. It was much more than that. It was an explicit [political rally](#) in support of President Trump. The duplicity of this needs to be recognized for what it is— using spiritual language to cloak clear political and partisan goals. As such, it cheapens if not neuters the Christian message such events seek to spread and damages Christian witness. It creates a legitimate critique from non-believers that Christianity is more about Caesar than it is about Christ.



❖ *This is unrelated to the election, but worth mentioning here.*

There is a very significant cleaving going on within White Evangelicalism in America, akin to the cleaving that happened in the 1950s between Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism. Mark Galli's [editorial](#) in *Christianity Today* denouncing President Trump was a major axe-blow in this splitting, as were the diverse and divided reactions to the president holding up a Bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington DC as a photo-op on June 1.

The Right is well represented by Jerry Falwell Jr., Franklin Graham, James Dobson, and others. The Left is well represented by Shane Claiborne, Jim Wallis, Ron Sider, and others. The Center is well represented by Russell Moore, Tim Keller, and others.

To use the word "Evangelical" to describe these groups at the same time is increasingly unhelpful and inaccurate. Many on the Left are abandoning the label "Evangelical" if they haven't already.

The Right and Left will not much longer be in any way connected under any name or label. Where those in the Center will end up is hard to say, though I'm guessing they'll drift more to the Left, in part by being ostracized or criticized by the Right for being 'too liberal.'

My guess is that those on the Right will retain the label "Evangelical," those on the Left will abandon it altogether, and those in the Center will use it less frequently as a self-descriptor.

It will be interesting to see what new label emerges for the Left and Center-Left. ❖

Why This Election Matters

To this point, I've mostly been writing more as a citizen of heaven than as a citizen of the United States. Here though, I write as an American citizen informed by my Christian, ethical, and philosophical convictions. These are my personal thoughts, and I would not expect all people to agree with them, and would even expect some good, faithful people to disagree with some of them. Furthermore, I recognize that there are certain tendencies and even core convictions of the Democratic party that are cause for real concern. For me, however, this election is less about party and more about the president.

The stakes in this particular election feel particularly high to me, including:

- **“Fake News.”** As early as 2016, I was sounding the alarm that this potent injection by the current president of the term “fake news” into our national vernacular to dismiss credible sources was profoundly dangerous for our society. When people are unable to dialogue based on actual facts from trustworthy sources, it becomes much more difficult, if not impossible, to find common ground and work across divides for common solutions. I am a huge believer that there is such a thing as truth, and that truth matters, and that there are such things as facts, and that those can be obtained. The current president’s seeming unwillingness to trade in facts, and also spread falsehood at an alarming rate, is a real threat to our civil society.
- **Adherence to the Rule of Law.** In his private life and political office, the current president seems to have little regard for the Rule of Law— a basic building block of a good and just society, one of the things that keeps America safe for most. This is a fundamental threat to what is foundational to our country as we’ve known it.
- **Emboldened White Supremacy.** The current president did not create the strong undercurrent of racism or white supremacy in America (that’s been here since the beginning), but he has certainly emboldened it and fanned its flames, and we’ve seen manifestations of it recently like we haven’t seen since the 1960s. As evidenced again in the first presidential debate, to this point he remains unable to bluntly reject white supremacy, even offering tacit acceptance of domestic terrorist groups. This is not only wrong, it is very dangerous. Not since the late 1850s has there been this much talk of a potential civil war. Recalling the Catholic Bishops’ letter, racism is a pro-life issue.
- **Character and Integrity of Elected Leaders.** There is little over the last three years that seems to indicate that this president’s character and integrity have improved or changed from the decades of his life as a private citizen,

which by all accounts has been extremely checkered at best. This election is a national referendum on the question, “Does character matter in our elected officials?” As I said above, I believe it does.

- **Peaceful Transfer of Power.** This is one of the jewels of modern American Democracy, that one president will peacefully step down at the end of two terms or if they lose an election after one. The current president thus far has been unable to give the assurance that he will, and in fact seems to be threatening otherwise. Until this very election, this has been unthinkable in the history of our country, and sets an extremely dangerous precedent.
- **Use of the Military for Political Agenda.** This was what happened at the Presidential photo opportunity in front of the church in Washington in June. Military leaders recognized that after the fact, and apologized. Again, this is an extremely dangerous precedent, unthinkable up to now, except now it has happened.
- **True Democracy.** One of the things I simply cannot understand is how a patriotic American in elected leadership would in any way seek to invalidate any citizen’s vote or make it more difficult for a citizen to vote. These officials are not interested in democracy actually, but rather in power. That the current president or members of his party (or any other party) would seek in any way to facilitate voter suppression, again, is not only wrong in a democracy, it is extremely dangerous. In this way (and remember, I’m typically not one to be hyperbolic or alarmist in such things), what’s at stake in this election feels to be the very nature of American democracy.
- **How We Treat Each Other.** The current president continues to normalize behaviors in regards to how people treat each other that are not only shameful, but are in fact a threat to civil society if they become the norm. The person who occupies the most visible office in the land should treat people better and set better examples. It’s very simple. Do I want my son to treat people the way our current president treats people? No, I do not.

- **The Pandemic.** No doubt some would disagree, but I believe that under the current president the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States will last longer and lead to more suffering and death than is necessary. There are pro-life concerns in this instance as well.

These are some of the reasons I told my son that I believed 2020 would be the most important election in America in my lifetime.

But what if any of the unthinkable happen?

Now I write as a Christian who loves my country. I will be sad for America and concerned about the implications. But I will not be fundamentally shaken. Any particular vision for America is neither my deepest hope nor my deepest identity. While some things that might develop would make life more difficult and complicated and perhaps lead to some hardships, even many, it will be nothing compared to the suffering that is endured by many around the world and throughout history, some for their Christian faith and others simply for living in a broken world with less-than-ideal governance.

I am profoundly moved by the testimony of the New Testament church as well as those who followed in the decades after. Their words and witness show us as Christians how to live, love, serve, and pray under a government that was far more hostile than ours (I think) will ever be.

Sometimes I remember a comment that I've heard a few Christians echo, "I'm not a donkey or an elephant, because my Lord is a lamb!" When I mentioned that a few years ago to my spiritual director, his simple comment was "And remember, **the Lamb conquers by being slaughtered.**" (Rev. 5.11) What might this mean for those of us (which is all Christians actually) in the Lamb's party?

What Happens November 4 and after?

On one level, for a Christian, what happens on November 4 (or whenever the final tally is official) is very simple. Whoever wins this election does not in the least bit alter my obligation as a disciple of Jesus to love God and love my

neighbor in my local context, and to work and advocate for the under-valued in any context.

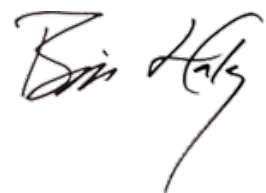
Regardless of who next occupies the White House come November, we can say that it hasn't changed much for Christians at all relative to our calling. **We take our cues from a King, not a president or any elected official or party.** So the impact for Christians in the wake of this 2020 election is simple: to keep on doing what we've always been called to do. Between November 3 and November 4, our public vocations as Christians in America won't have changed a bit– to love our neighbor actually, serve the poor generously, welcome strangers hospitably, stand for the dignity of life consistently, pray deeply, and proclaim the lordship of Jesus joyfully!

As I've been doing this whole election season and will definitely do the morning of November 4– regardless of who is elected– I will, and all Christians should, be mindful that we are one with and surrounded by a great communion of saints, so “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **fixing our eyes on Jesus**, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb. 12.1-2)

Even thinking about how I will think about Jesus on November 4 gives me joy today!

On Thursday evening, November 5, very conscientiously and in light of however the election turns out, Coracle will offer a guided and reflective listening of the “B-Minor Mass”, that magisterial choral piece by J.S. Bach, with its core of a sublime rendering of the Nicene Creed. We're considering it something of a ‘post-election palate cleanser,’ a way to get our eyes and hearts off that which is passing and back onto what (Who) is eternal. I invite you to join us, and you can register [here](#). It will be gorgeous. Even thinking about that on November 5 gives me great joy right now!

On the Journey,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben Halz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail that extends downwards and to the right.

PS: On Wednesday, October 13 at 5.30pm (ET), some of us will join in conversation about this reflection and the thoughts of others in our next “Questions that Matter” discussion on the question, “**How Can A Christian Think About This Election?**” I’d love to hear your thoughts, so please join us by registering [here](#).



Rev. Bill Haley is Executive Director of [Coracle](#), a ministry that exists to inspire and enable people to be the presence of God in the brokenness of the world through Spiritual Formation *for* Kingdom Action.

Some of this happens at Corhaven, a retreat home in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia near Mt. Jackson; some of it happens in the Washington, D.C. metro area and throughout the mid-Atlantic; some of it happens around the country and around the world.

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