



## **Engage: Youth Ministry & Contemporary Issues Faith and Politics**

### **Introduction:**

The polarizing rhetoric surrounding this presidential election has dominated the last eighteen months of American life, through primaries, debates, advertising, and the narrowing of the field of candidates. While most youth are not yet of voting age, they remain undeniably affected by the outcome of this election and are watching closely to see who will be the next President of the United States. Many Christians are as polarized as the rest of the electorate, claiming moral high ground in defense of their chosen issues or candidates. While this election is unique in some ways (the first woman at the top of the ticket is running against a celebrity business mogul), it remains much like many other election seasons—anxiety-producing, fear-driven, and frustrating.

United States citizens appear divided on every issue—military, refugees, immigration, welfare, taxes, ISIS, abortion, the Supreme Court, the Second Amendment, policing, gender, sexuality, economics, marriage, and others. As Christians living in a democratic society, many of whom are empowered with the right to vote, how do we navigate life in the public square? What guides our decisions and rhetoric? What anxieties and fears are exposed in our public communal life? How can we follow Jesus together while holding strong and divergent positions?

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## Articles

### Response: Andrew Wilkes

As a student at Princeton Seminary, I remember hearing Dr. Paul Rorem's wise observation: "History provides perspective. And perspective, potentially, provides hope." In that spirit, consider the following snapshot of American political history.

In November 1968, the presidential campaign of Richard Nixon purchased a four-part ad series in the iconic *Jet* magazine, then the highest-circulation weekly in African-American communities. Against the backdrop of central city uprisings, the Democratic Party's Great Society programs, and the popularity of civil rights legislation, the Nixon campaign sought to devise a pitch to African-American voters. After consulting with what some have called his black brain trust – U.S. Senator Edward Brooke, Floyd McCissick, and others – Nixon settled on black capitalism as an organizing phrase for his appeal to middle-class, college educated African-American voters.

Black capitalism, in essence, was about a kind of civic theodicy for the failures of capitalism to provide economic opportunity for black households. Put differently, it functioned not simply as a voter turnout strategy but as a rhetorical strategy for defending the goodness of a broken system. Nixon's strategies and campaign staff knew that winning the black vote outright was out of reach. Nevertheless, securing a decent plurality of black votes was pivotal to taking the White House. As Theodore Johnson notes in an article for *Politico*, Nixon's ads "speak to all the trappings of the middle-class: good jobs, safe and prosperous communities, a solid education, homeownership—the tenets of the proverbial American Dream." Johnson goes on to argue explicitly "[Republican presidential candidates today can and should communicate the same](#)".<sup>1</sup> One of those ads deserves special attention. The ad positioned Homer Pitts as a sort of everyman stand-in for the well-being of the black electorate at-large. It read:

*"He'll get his degree. Then what? Laborer, factory job...or his own business? A vote for Richard Nixon for President is a vote for a man who wants Homer to have the chance to own his own business. Richard Nixon believes strongly in black capitalism. Because black capitalism is black power in the best sense of the word. It's the road that leads to black economic influence and black pride. It's the key to the black man's fight for equality—for a piece of the action. And that's what the free enterprise system is all about. This time...Nixon"*<sup>2</sup>  
(emphasis added).

Nixon's ad makes a nuanced appeal to the then-ascendant politics of black nationalism, racial solidarity, and the do-for-self ethos of black business as social salvation. By mixing a garden variety pitch for small business with an intimation of community control in the frame "black capitalism," the agitation aesthetic of "the black man's fight for equality," and the psycho-cultural motivation of enterprise as leading to "black economic influence," a "piece of the

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore R. Johnson, "What Nixon Can Teach the GOP About Courting Black Voters," *Politico Magazine*, published August 15, 2015, [http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/what-nixon-can-teach-the-gop-about-courting-black-voters-121392\\_Page3.html#.V\\_5liI54xLV](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/what-nixon-can-teach-the-gop-about-courting-black-voters-121392_Page3.html#.V_5liI54xLV)

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from *Jet Magazine*, November 7, 1968, page 9

action” and “black pride”—Nixon pioneered, at least rhetorically, a linked frame of racial solidarity and private sector impact that has been ascendant in both parties for nearly a half-century.

The assumption of Nixon and his circle of advisors seems to be that the capitalist ideology would not only deliver a plurality of black voters in November but also curate a worldview more receptive to private sector dominance – that is, the priority of capital – within the American political economy.

The black capitalism banner of Nixon proved successful. Johnson presses the case, observing that, “On Election night 1968, the payoff from Nixon’s strategy became clear. Just four years after Barry Goldwater [only got](#) 6 percent of the black vote—and with only 3 percent of black voters identifying as Republican in 1968, the lowest total since 1936—Nixon received 15 percent of their votes. For perspective, Mitt Romney earned only 6 percent, and John McCain, 4 percent.”<sup>3</sup>

In debuting this strategy, Nixon mobilized a similar dynamic as Trump: targeted outreach with black capitalism to middle-class, college-educated blacks while courting working-class white Republican votes with a law-and-order, anxiety-driven pitch.

Black capitalism, today, is being pitched as a Nixon 2.0 strategy by Trump. In the first instance, Trump positioned himself in both the RNC Convention address and the first presidential debate with Sec. Hilary Clinton as a law and order candidate who could bring business back to inner-cities. Trump is extending Nixon’s electoral strategy through alternate means. Vernon Jarrett, a writer for the Chicago Tribune, captured the Trump-as-Nixon register when he contended that [Nixon’s playbook of black capitalism](#) lives on through all subsequent attempts to talk about economic mobility for people of color through a frame of small business, entrepreneurship, minority contracts, and executives of color in corporate America as an institutional response to unemployment and underemployment within African-American communities.<sup>4</sup>

Capitalism as black empowerment voter pitches should be rejected this fall—whether the communicator is the candidate or surrogate, whether the party be Democratic or Republican. On what grounds, though, does the rejection take place?

One reason for the rejection is that neither version prioritizes the transformative reforms of positioning the right to unionize as the civil right of assembly. Neither version prioritizes the critical relief measures of robust public funding for undercapitalized public housing. And neither version responds to the Great Recession’s evisceration of black wealth, [half of which was swept away by the Great Recession and Wall Street recklessness](#).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Politico Magazine*

<sup>4</sup> Vernon Jarrett, “Black Capitalism Revived by GOP,” *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL) July 23, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> “Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs Between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (July 26, 2011) [http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/07/SDT-Wealth-Report\\_7-26-11\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/07/SDT-Wealth-Report_7-26-11_FINAL.pdf).

Black capitalism, as intimated above, means more than voter outreach strategies targeting African-American voters. At its heart, black capitalism is about rationalizing the structural inequalities of our national life by lifting up a neat solution of education and entrepreneurship, homeownership and a dash of can-do spirit as the antidote for the market failures of racialized capitalism in America. Put differently, black capitalism is the Protestant work ethic remixed, the notion of Asian-Americans as a model minority of economic mobility, the ideal of Latino families as the heralds of a multicultural marketplace leadership, and so on.

Rejecting black capitalism need not require abstinence from voting. What it does mean, though, is refusing to believe that massive, racialized wealth inequality is the inevitable price of an expanding economy. If Christians are a people given a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind, our prime motivation should not be fear. Further, in view of the Apostle Paul's Romans 13:4 vision of the State advancing the common good, Christians who vote do well to cast a ballot for the candidate we believe will best advance the common good of all, especially the unpropertied, un(der)employed, and most vulnerable among us. This is an imperfect measure of voting faithfully, but this is our charge: to make the most principled decisions we can make with incomplete information, completely trusting in God.

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**Response: Luke Bretherton**

*Nostalgia and the nature of a hopeful politics.*

There is one narrative of the current presidential race that presents Hilary Clinton as the candidate who stands for stability, while Donald Trump represents disruption. Further reflection suggests that both candidates represent different kinds of nostalgia in the face of the precariousness and disorder we experience now.

This sense of disorder is no illusion. We are beset by foundational questions about what human flourishing consists of in every area of life. Among the many questions being asked in our present moment some are these:

- As we become more ethnically and morally diverse as societies and some states collapse, while in others, historic wounds fester and erupt we ask, is a common life even possible?
- When we can manipulate the basic structures of life at a DNA and planetary level, we ask, what does it mean to be human? What is our relationship to the land, the sea and the air? And what are our responsibilities to the planet as a whole?
- Amid economic crises and the dominance of the plutocratic 1% we ask, are there limits to the market?
- Through debates about gender and sexuality we ask, what does it mean to be a man or woman? What should the nature, form and role of the family be? How are we going to raise our kids?
- Amid changing patterns of work and the incursion of information technology into every area of life we ask, what is work? What is social life? What should be the relationship between humans and machines?
- With changes in medical technology we ask, what is health? How will we care for those aging?
- In a globalized world made up of networks and flows of people, information, goods, and services we ask, what should the role and form of the state be? Is democracy fit for purpose?

An analogous moment occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through processes of urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization, and imperialism. Fundamental questions about the social, economic and political basis of human life together were asked. This was a trans-Atlantic conversation and, within the context of European empires, a global one. It took two world wars, the rise of totalitarian states, and a great depression, but with the advent of the New Deal in the US and formation of welfare states in Europe after World War II, many of these questions received normative settlements that took particular institutional forms in health, education, and family life.

In the West these settlements are increasingly questioned. We have become skeptical about the role of the state as a mechanism for redistribution and as the best means for addressing the provision of welfare. But we are also increasingly skeptical about the role of the market as the best or only means of providing necessary goods and services. In the contemporary context, non-market and non-state centric approaches to addressing shared problems are fragile. At the same time, we ignore questions of ends by obsessing over what are the right means. We focus on

producing potable water rather than what we are morally obligated to do with it. We focus on techniques of education rather than its purpose and meaning. We focus on sustaining life rather than asking what is the meaning of life. We believe we can or at least should be able to master the world around us. And so we focus on the means of mastery: economics, science, technology, politics. We are obsessed with the means of mastery. It fills the news cycle. In higher education there are myriad courses about means – economics, biology, etc. – but no courses on what it might mean to live a good life. But in focusing on means we lose sight of ends, of purposes, of meaning itself.

And so when confronted with uncertainty we are prone to nostalgia for a world that seemed more stable, for a world we understood, for a way of doing things that seemed, at one point, to make sense. Trump's campaign trades in weaponized forms of nostalgia. But so does Clinton's. Her message is let's keep doing more of the same. They both present solutions for a world that no longer exists.

The remarkable rise of Donald Trump can be read as a form of immanent theodicy: the attempt to make sense of suffering, disorder, and pain and the fear and anxiety they produce. But this is an idolatrous theodicy that, with a shrill petulance, cries peace for me and mine, whatever the expense for others. It attempts to deal with uncertainty through the re-establishment of prior regimes of control, while ignoring how these regimes of control and the prosperity they once produced were founded on violent disorder and destruction of others, particularly those judged racial and religious others.

A theologically grounded response begins by recognizing that humans can only know the truth about what it means to be human through finitude: that is, risking negotiated historical relations. Through participation in the world around us humans may discover and then make sense of who we are in relation to God and others. For this to occur it requires attentiveness to and reception of a world we did not make and others we do not control. Attentiveness and reception – characterized by a posture of listening – is the precursor of shared speech and action and thence the coming into being of a common life.

As Christians we can trust that just and generous forms of common life can be discovered. We don't have to live through world wars and totalitarian regimes to get there. But if this process of discovery is to be faithful, hopeful, and loving it entails rendering ourselves vulnerable to others we don't understand, probably don't like and may even find scandalous or threatening. It certainly requires renouncing illusions of control and nostalgia for forms of life that were never that good in the first place.

The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, rather than economic prosperity or national greatness, offer the possibility of movement into new kinds of relationship with God and neighbor. This conversion demands that we humans orientate ourselves in a particular way to living in time and the experience of flux and transition that is constitutive of being temporal creatures. Such an orientation rules out a nostalgic division that poses the past as good and the present as intrinsically bad, as well as making judgments about who is and who is not on the "right side of history." Rather, ways must be found to identify with Christ and thereby dis-identify with the historical idols and cultural systems of domination within which human life is

always and already entangled. Politics, understood as action in time through which forms of just and peaceable common life are cultivated, is a necessary part of any such process of discovery. At the same time, the tragic dimensions of social and political life cannot be avoided and failure is often the result. Yet faith, hope and love demand the risk be taken.

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**Response: Emily Dumler- Winckler**

***Will We Be Neighbors? A Politics of Fear or Love in 2016***

Let's put the question to Jesus. Who should Christians vote for in this presidential election? I imagine he might put the question back to us: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" That is Jesus's response to an inquisitive lawyer in the Gospel of Luke. The lawyer answers correctly: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself." (Matt. 22, Mark. 10, Luke 12)

On the face of it, this dual love commandment may not seem like much of a guide for the perplexed in politics, no less, a manual for the 2016 election cycle. And it's not in any straightforward sense. It is one of the most famous and seemingly least controversial passages in the New Testament. What's to dispute? Indeed, what's political?

Luke's lawyer must have known then, as now, that politics are in the details. So he presses. "And who is my neighbor?" He gets a story about a man who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead on the side of the road. Two religious Jewish men passed that way and ignored the man, but a Samaritan helped him. Which of the three travelers, Jesus asks, *was* a neighbor to this destitute man? If there was any doubt about the political nature of the lawyer's question, Jesus's response is telling. The Samaritans were famous enemies of the Jews. The Samaritan—the outsider, the foreigner—is the neighbor because he *acts* as a neighbor to the abandoned man, to those Jesus calls "the least of these."

This question, "who is my neighbor?" is every bit as political as it is theological. For *being* a neighbor entails not only loving our enemies, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, welcoming the alien, and caring for orphans and widows. It also requires changing the policies, institutions, and systems that keep the poor poor, the hungry hungry, the homeless homeless, the refugees refugees, and the incarcerated incarcerated.

Many of those in vulnerable communities, especially those of color, already know this. The youth group that just participated in [EPIC's](#) (End the Prison Industrial Complex) [action](#) with Seattle's City Council knows this. The [black men](#) who cheered on children at John Muir Elementary School in Seattle, despite the bomb threat, know this. Those working with organizations such as: Black Lives Matter, the Black Youth Project 100, Dream Defenders, Movimienta Cosecha, The Working World, the MOVE Organization, and other labor movements know that neighbor love is political. They know that voting is not the only or most effective way to be a neighbor. And still, it matters.

Many Christians have the impression that loving God and neighbor is non-political, a merely personal matter of charity and service. The call to love does not involve Christians in politics and power—so the story goes. Some say the *only* faithful response for Christians, given the options in this election, is to abstain from voting. If there is no candidate that we can unreservedly endorse, without qualm or quibble, then let us wash our hands of this election. Leave it to the angry (if justifiably discontent) crowd to decide. Yet if being neighbors means caring about how elected officials will impact the least of these, then Christians cannot merely spectate. We have a responsibility to thoughtfully engage this election cycle.

The following question ought to guide our considerations: Which candidate—given their values, ideals, policies, promises, and record—will best support the least of these? Who will support the American people as neighbors to those in need? Who will support the over 15 million children growing up below the poverty line (a bar already set too low)? Who will support American workers, welcome refugees, [support young single mothers](#), reverse the trends of the police state, address corporate corruption, diminish incarceration, support reasonable gun regulations, promote just wages for women, keep America out of unjust war and wage war justly, ensure health care, attend to pressing environmental concerns, and denounce racism, sexism, heterosexism, and xenophobia? These are not trick questions. There are no easy answers.

This election, perhaps more so than others, has played on Americans' fears. This is the case on both sides. Donald Trump has played on, and no doubt stoked, fears of ISIS, Muslims, [refugees](#), [immigrants](#), and "[the establishment](#)." [Many](#) would-be Bernie supporters have resigned themselves to vote for Hillary Clinton in fear of a Trump presidency. I suggest the primary motivation for marking a ballot box in November should be love and not fear.

No doubt, the two are connected. Our loves determine our fears. Our fears reveal our loves. But we need to test our loves and examine our fears. What's more, fear is a lousy primary motivation. As Princeton professor [Eddie Glaude](#) recently noted, fear "all too often sends you running to either safe ground when something more daring is required, or smack into the danger itself." Yet, fear *itself* is not so much the problem. The question is what we do with it. We call those who act out of love in the face of fear *courageous*. That's the goal.

Perhaps the word courageous best describes the likes of Cornel West, [Eddie Glaude](#), and [Mark Taylor](#). Each fears a Trump presidency. [Glaude](#) suggests that Trump is the *best* reason to vote for Clinton. West calls Trump a [neo-fascist catastrophe](#). But each refuses to unreservedly support Clinton. In West's words, the legacy of this "[neo-liberal disaster](#)" has *already* been devastating for the most vulnerable—for those affected by U.S. militarism abroad and at home, for the two million incarcerated, and particularly for black and brown communities.

Let's be frank. Trump would, as West prophesies, be a neo-fascist catastrophe. It must be said. He weds corporate power, militarism, and neo-fascism to the worst of American [misogyny](#), [sexism](#), [racism](#), and [xenophobia](#). Not convinced? See this [reddit](#). If elected and allowed to fulfill his promises, his presidency would be devastating for the most vulnerable in our midst and around the world. And yet, driven by love for the least of these rather than merely by fear of Trump, West, Glaude, and Taylor feel compelled to, as [Glaude](#) puts it, "turn [their] backs on the party that turns its back on the most vulnerable." Note their objections to Clinton are not about the email scandal or narrowly conceived questions of character. Their objections have nothing to do with the blatant or subtler forms of misogyny and sexism that have been unveiled in this election cycle. To be sure, Trump would be worse, but he sets the bar unimaginably low.

What to do when neither nominee in our two party system is remotely ideal? How, then, do we vote? Glaude calls for strategic voting with the priority on keeping Trump out of office. Taylor and West, in solidarity with those who will suffer most, are willing to pay the high price of a Trump presidency, in an effort to defeat "[Clintonian neo-liberalism](#)." [West](#) has endorsed the

Green Party's Jill Stein. The fact that most Americans are not thrilled about either major party nominee in this election cycle reveals the deficiencies of a two party system. We need to imagine alternatives and work to end the duopoly.

Needless to say, Jesus does not exactly answer our question, "Who do I vote for?" But that's precisely the point. To become a discerning voter guided by justice and love for the most vulnerable requires curiosity, openness, and courage. And voting is just one important political aspect of what it means to love our neighbor.

The children and youth of our country will not be voting on November 8<sup>th</sup>. Nonetheless, how Christians think and speak about this election cycle, about the candidates and the stakes, our fears, hopes and loves, will shape their political involvement. This is the first political question: Will we be neighbors? And, [Michelle Alexander's](#) is next: what does this require of us?

For those inclined to lists, here's my quick guide:

1. The most important question Christian voters should begin with is: which candidate will support the cause of "the least of these" broadly considered, both nationally and internationally?
2. Voting matters (and strategically abstaining from voting matters): Turn out and vote at the national and local levels. Don't abstain from voting just because there's no perfect or ideal candidate. If you abstain from voting for the president (as [Glaude](#) recommends in his blank out campaign), vote down ballot and find ways to be involved locally.
3. If neither the GOP nor DNC nominee proves to be a clear advantage for the most vulnerable, it may be worth voting for a less than ideal candidate to keep a worse candidate from office.
4. We must learn to think and vote beyond party lines, beyond the culture wars. Neither the Republican nor the Democratic Party unilaterally represents a faithful Christian agenda. Put anything that reeks of religious partisanship to rigorous testing.
5. Regardless of who wins the election, the most important thing is a sustained commitment to the least of these.

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**Response: Kang Na**

***State and Church, and the State of the Church***

From about three dozen political parties<sup>6</sup>, and after seventeen Republican and six Democratic contenders, it has once again come down to two people trying to persuade their fellow citizens to vote for them to preside over these United States of America. We face the music of our republican constitutional heritage by electing our leader from among us every four years. And every four years, we seem to join this civic dance of ours with increasing fatalism, with more citizens voting *against* candidates as much as *for* them, knowing that the two-party system enjoys a kind of political *perichoresis* that will place either a Democrat or a Republican in the White House. Such is the quadrennial fate of our nation, at least into the foreseeable future.

As we have been watching and participating in this inevitable song and dance—pace the Amish and other blissful non-participants—we have seen an unusual election year with surprises accompanying the usual cynicism about politics. And all the perennial rhetoric from our candidates about Washington’s “business as usual” should cause Christian citizens to pause and view our civic realities through Christian lenses, and to reflect theologically in and for churches seeking to discern God’s will. For Christians, the civic duty to vote must be accompanied by the prayerful duty to discern providence. Yet among Christians, just as among Americans in general, we have deep divisions in the house. Divisions among churchgoers are so grave that partisan zeal for political victory obscures our praxis of Jesus’ commandment for us to love one another. How can anyone know that we are his disciples (John 13.34–35)? Such is the state of our church.

The church, like Israel, has always known division; it is in our biblical and historical DNA. Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, the sons of Jacob . . . these siblings and their rivalries make the dysfunctional families on the Jerry Springer show seem humdrum. And these are in Genesis alone. Miriam and Aaron’s rebellion against Moses is no surprise (Numbers 12), as also the tribal jealousies during the time of the settlement in Canaan and through the kingship of Saul to the tragic division of Israel into the northern and southern kingdoms. Even the return from the Babylonian Exile to rebuild the temple, a symbol of Israelite unity, was not without a painful banishment of foreign wives and their children of Israelite fathers (Ezra 10). The New Testament is no better, with Judas among the twelve disciples, the apostles in bitter disputes about what to do with Gentile believers (e.g., Acts 15, Galatians 2) and divisive factions in Gentile churches (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1). If anything, the Bible is true to real life; it provides both a corrective to those who sigh nostalgically about the good old days of the Bible and a comfort to those who recognize that we are basically in the same (flawed) boat as the Israelites and the early churches.

Subsequent (hi)stories of churches are rife with theological, doctrinal, and political discord involving bishops behaving badly as well as popes and kings whose goal seems to have been to obscure the love of God in Christ. The *Realtheologie* that we learn about from church history books—e.g., Constantine, doctrinal battles leaving a trail of heresies, excommunications, schisms, the Inquisition, religious wars in Europe—not only disappoint optimistic Christians but

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<sup>6</sup> The United States currently has about three dozen political parties; “Directory of U.S Political Parties,” Politics1. July 2016, <http://www.politics1.com/parties.htm>

also provide the evangelical atheists their apologetic ammunition. History's Machiavellian concessions to Realpolitik appear to find uneasy parallels also in matters ecclesiological.

All this realism and history notwithstanding, we should still like to think that the evolution of our species has improved our lot. Certainly the technological marvels in the past century have been mind-blowing. The recent Olympics reminds us of how human beings have in fact lived up to its motto, "Citius, Altius, Fortius," which is Latin for *faster, higher, stronger*. We can travel thousands of miles in a few hours; we have pierced through our atmospheric limits and landed on the moon; we live longer than all generations before us. We know more about the universe than ever before, can access information faster, make better machines, have better healthcare, . . . the list is long and impressive. In every aspect of human existence, we can catalog progress through the millennia. Or so it seems.

The only thing—arguably the most important thing—that has not seen improvement is our moral condition and ethical choices. Our history of continual advancement has been on a path of constant and persistent moral disappointment. Indeed, the most technologically progressive century saw the world's most devastating weapons, violence, revolutions, and wars that took more human life than ever before—Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were responsible, some estimate, for the loss of over a hundred million lives. Material progress and moral depravity have been constant companions in human history; the ten commandments are necessary now more than ever for the maintenance of civil society, let alone religious piety. No matter how much we progress into the hope-filled future—pace the political candidates—history tells us there are Idi Amins and Miloševićs yet to be born.

Before every election, we hear promises of would-be messiahs who want to and know how to save our nation from its current state. Faced with the two parties, as in every election, I silently want to echo Mercutio's dying words in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as he curses both the Montagues and Capulets: "A plague o' both your houses!" Yet division and sibling rivalry are the default human condition from the very first family in Genesis. I also know that it is *into* this flawed humanity that God spoke grace and *within* it that God elected Israel. If the Bible teaches us anything, it is that God works providentially with actual human history and broken human beings. If we think any candidate will rescue us from what ails the universe, then a review of history or a simple glance at Augustine's *City of God* might suggest a more sobering wisdom. At the least, we might learn humility.

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## **Response: Amy Peeler**

“All too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.” Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

I live behind several layers of stained glass windows. During the week, I teach at a Christian College and during the weekend, I serve as an Associate Rector at a vibrant Episcopal church. When I was teaching MLK’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail last week, I found this line incredibly convicting. Racism, painfully, remains a vicious problem for so many in America, but what if anything have I done to speak against it? To support those who are fighting for recognition of their humanity? Or had I simply exercised the right of white privilege and “remained silent”?

Donald Trump encourages racism. Not only is he personally guilty of racism in word (In the 1990’s he stated, “laziness is a trait in blacks, it really is, I believe that. It’s not anything they can control”) and deed (In the 1970’s he instructed his managers to code housing applications with a “C” for black people so that they would be denied and whites allowed in),<sup>7</sup> but even more dangerously, he fans the flames of ethnic distrust. One might counter that his past deeds are in the past. All politicians have skeletons to unearth.

The present, however, cannot be so easily forgiven, especially when no forgiveness is asked. Throughout the campaign, he has played on stereotypes, fed on fear, and, at times, condoned violence. He never comes out and says, “I hate people of color,” in so many words, but constant innuendoes and implications amass into an undeniable reality. White supremacists have certainly heard the message. David Duke, former Ku Klux Klan leader, has been a vocal supporter of Trump, as is the leader of the American Nazi Party, Rocky Suhayda: “Donald Trump’s campaign statements, if nothing else, have SHOWN that ‘our views’ are NOT so ‘unpopular’ as the Political Correctness crowd have told everyone they are!”<sup>8</sup>

It is not difficult to think of Biblical texts that decry such things. Any text that prohibits coarse speech (Eph 4:29; James 1:26; Proverbs 11:9) is easily quoted, but much more substantively stands the fact that such a wide swath of the New Testament is aimed specifically at the issue of race: from Jesus’ uncomfortable description of the “good” Samaritans (Luke 10:25–37; 17:16), to the selection of the seven servants to alleviate the discrimination against the Hebrew widows (Acts 6:1–3), to the watershed moment of the Jerusalem Council when James declares that God has called the Gentiles into his people and should be troubled no more (Acts 15:13–31).

I had grown up thinking that Paul’s message consisted of instructions for sinners to be saved by a holy God. That is Paul’s message, but a myopic focus on individual salvation misses the driving heartbeat of his ministry. He calls himself not the “Apostle to Sinners” but the “Apostle to the

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “Is Donald Trump A Racist?” *New York Times* July 23, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Holley, “Top Nazi leader: Trump Will be a ‘Real Opportunity’ for White Nationalists,” *Washington Post*, August 7, 2016.

Gentiles” (Gal 2:8; Rom 11:13) and works for reconciliation between God and humans and *also* humans with one another. For Paul, the recently revealed great mystery of Christ was that the Gentiles were included in God’s unfailing promise to His people the Jews (Eph 3:6). In Christ there is no longer Jew nor Gentile (Gal 3:28) because God has broken down the dividing wall between these groups (Eph 2:15). We must be careful to note this is not for Paul some pie-in-the-sky, *Kum-ba-yah*, warm, fuzzy, spiritual or eschatological platitude. This reconciliation is here and now with tangible social implications. This means he constantly preaches the good news to his fellow Jews. This means Gentile men do not have to be circumcised. This means Peter certainly better keep sharing meals with Gentiles (Gal 2:14). Racism will not be tolerated in the church of God.

Politics are not the church of God. Nevertheless, living in a democracy and having the power to vote for one’s elected officials mixes the realms between our faith and the *polis*. We are not responsible for Trump, but we are responsible for the vote we cast. Some Christians may decide after careful deliberation that Trump is the better option. I respect their right as Americans to vote and their right as Christians to exercise their conscience, even though taste and research leads me in a different direction. I covet honest, respectful dialogue with those choosing differently in order to hear what issues led to a decision for Trump.

My appeal is this: if a Christian is to pull that lever and cast their vote for Trump, do so with the full knowledge that the “lesser of two evils” has racist tendencies, carries racist support, and has spurred on racism. I acknowledge that an answer to the following question might be yes, but I am compelled to ask it: Are you willing acknowledge to future generations that you voted for one who sought not to break the dividing wall down, but to build it up?

For my own part, I have for too long stood silent behind stained glass. Sometimes busy, sometimes repulsed by the election at hand. But as a Christian educator writing to fellow Christian educators, I know the time for silence has passed. The disadvantages for people of color in our country demand disciplined action, conceivably for a long time. However, I can start here, start today, and refuse to vote for a candidate who will continue to increase negative sentiment against people of color. In a spirit of both passion and humility, I invite my students, my parishioners, my family, and my friends to consider doing the same.

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## Discussion Questions

1. How does your faith inform your view of this year's elections? Do you think the political climate also informs your faith life? If so, how?
2. Identify some key issues at stake. Reflect on whether those issues intersect with your faith and how. How would you like to engage those issues outside of the election cycle?
3. In a country that values the separation of church and state, how should individual citizens navigate their relationships between church and state?
4. Do we expect our politicians to be role models? Why and in what manner?
5. What are the various voices that help to shape your worldview? Who are the people you trust to inform and guide you in your own political thoughts and theories?
6. How would you respond to the implication that our Presidential candidates ought to be role models in speech and action?