

Christians & Politics

BY MONTE WOLVERTON

Where Is Your
Citizenship?



My eight-year-old eyes blinked in disbelief. Gramma Olive's familiar chairs and coffee table had been replaced by a couple of big plywood booths draped with black curtains. Canvas bags lay on the floor, bulging with something Gramma called "ballots." It was November of 1956, and Adlai Stevenson II was running against Dwight Eisenhower for President. As was her custom,

my civic-minded paternal grandmother had volunteered her home as a polling place.

My parents, on the other hand, were religiously apolitical, and Gramma was not happy with that fact. She wanted to be sure that I understood the importance of civic involvement. A self-sufficient Maine-Yankee-Methodist-Republican, she staunchly believed in our governmental system—and that Christians

had a responsibility to get involved and make a difference.

But then there was my mother's





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brother—ardent labor unionist and socialist Uncle Gary. Just imagine the fun Gramma and Uncle Gary provided at family gatherings—Gramma's plucky resolve vs. Uncle Gary's sardonic wit.

As I entered my teens and became more politically aware, I confess I may have encouraged their sometimes heated dialogs—which were nonetheless civil and without ill will.

Gramma gave me books to read, such as Barry Goldwater's *Conscience of a Conservative*. Uncle Gary also had plenty of literature to share with me. Small wonder, then, that during my relatively apolitical young adulthood, I wavered between liberal and conservative views.

A Nation Fractured and Fragmented

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since the days when Gramma and Uncle Gary debated politics over apple pie and homemade ice cream in my parents' family room. Yet these exchanges were mild compared to the rancorous national discourse in America today. In this presidential election year, extremists are pulling the parties in opposite directions. Sane voices of compromise and cooperation are all but silenced, and dialogue has been replaced by shouting and name calling.

While on the far left some would demolish the entire capitalist system, on the far right others would swap federal government for "corporatocracy." Some would bankrupt the nation with nanny-state social programs—others would bankrupt the nation with police-the-world military spending.

Beyond all this—religion is pouring gasoline on an already intense fire. Some Christians, outraged that America does not measure up

to the standards of the kingdom of God (when did it ever?), are fighting a "culture war," trying to "bring America back to Christ." They believe this can be done by Christian dominance and control—by repealing unchristian laws, and passing legislation to ensure that all citizens behave morally. They say America can "once again" become the Christian nation that the Founding Fathers intended.

It seems that many Christians have become religiously political—that politics has become their religion.

Is this what Christians are supposed to be doing? Author Gregory Boyd doesn't think so. In his book *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, he argues that Jesus' objective was never to Christianize the world through human government:

"Jesus didn't come to give us the Christian answer to the world's many sociopolitical quandaries, and he didn't come to usher in a new and improved version of the kingdom of the world. His agenda was far more radical, for he came to redeem the world and ultimately overthrow the kingdom of the world by ushering in an alternative kingdom. He came not to give solutions; tweak external regulations, and enforce better behavior. He rather came to transform lives from the inside out by winning people over to the reign of God's sovereign love..." (page 59).

As to whether America was ever a Christian nation, Boyd comments:

"If we look at historical reality rather than pious verbiage, it's obvious that America never really 'belonged to God....' There was nothing distinctively Christlike about the way America was 'discovered,' conquered, or governed in the early years.... The fact that it was largely done under the banner of Christ doesn't make it more Christian, any more than any other bloody conquest done in Jesus' name throughout history (such as the Crusades and the Inquisition) qualifies them as Christlike" (page 99).

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Christian Myths—How We Got This Way

How did a good portion of the church in America get sidetracked from the gospel of grace—from peacemakers to political extremists—from Christ-centered conciliators to crusading culture warriors?

Millions of Christians imagine an imminent physical return of Jesus in which he wrests political control of the world from secular humanists, installing devout, churchgoing evangelicals as his deputies in every nation, state and city and coercing humans to obey religious rules, regulations and requirements under the

threat of dire punishments or instant death and eternal consignment to the fires of hell. In this mythical scenario Jesus uses his superpowers to disinfect the earth of sinners, leaving a steadfastly religious remnant to enjoy a blissful if rigorous millennial utopia.

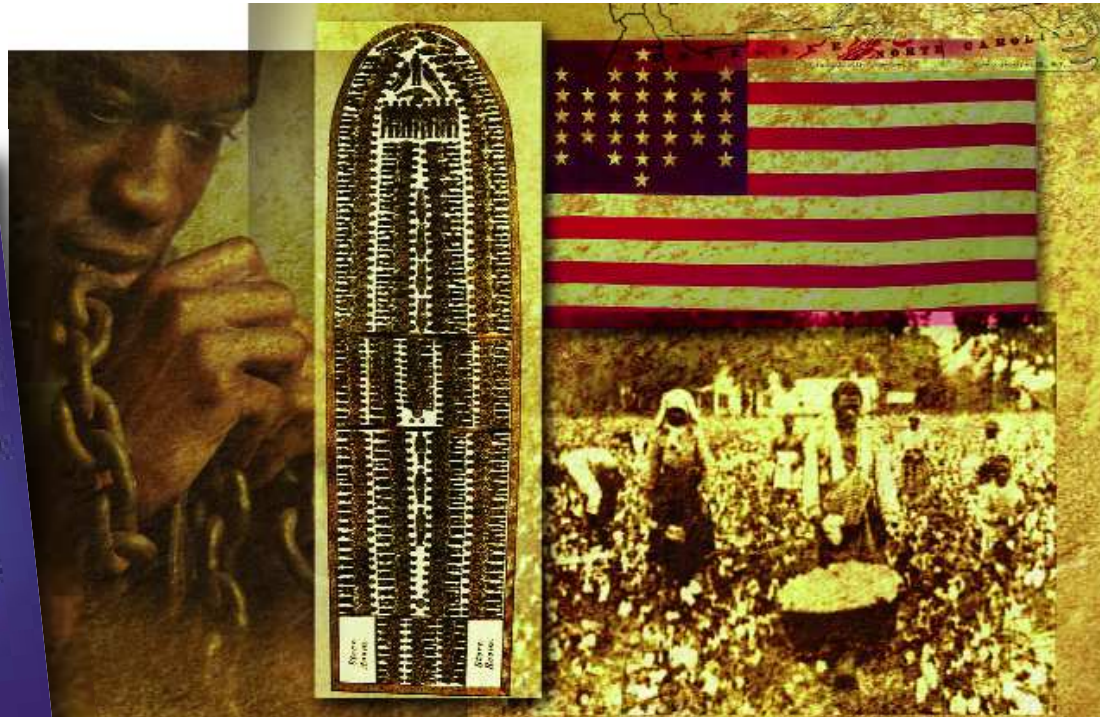
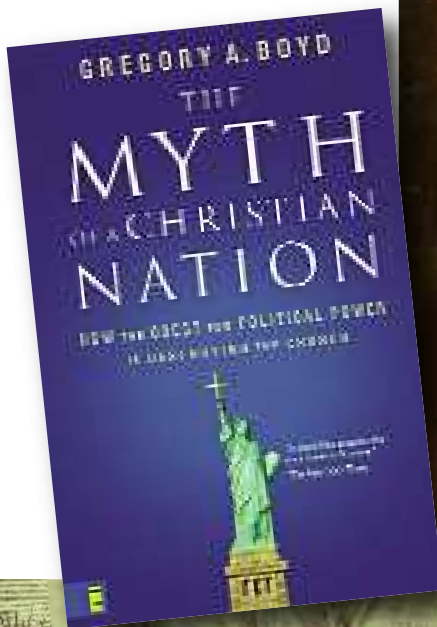
“What’s wrong with that?” some may ask. What’s wrong, is that in addition to being a flawed biblical interpretation, this approach is no different than the thousands of human dictatorial regimes in our history books. It grossly misrepresents

sents the kingdom of God as just another kingdom of this world.

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But in one of the passages that does not fit the above scheme, Jesus tells us “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:20-21).

Jesus was referring to *himself*. In other words, *Jesus is the kingdom of God*, and when we yield to God’s grace and trust in Christ alone, he lives within us. While we look for-




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ward to the transformation of the earth and all humanity, Jesus will not accomplish that through some kind of military coup and divine dictatorship.

Given their way-off-target expectations, apocalyptic Christians may

be prone to withdraw from participation in human governance, believing that it is pointless, since any minute now Christ will return and “establish” his kingdom.

Other, non-apocalyptic Christians (influenced by Calvinist

Reconstructionists and Dominionists) are busy using the political system to institute a Christian oligarchy, with laws similar to those of the Old Testament. Included in this camp are postmillennialists who believe that Christ will return only after a thousand years of righteous human government.

Are any of these approaches really endorsed in the New Testament? Where in Scripture do Jesus and the apostles advocate conservative or liberal economic policies? In what ways, if any, does Jesus intend for his people to be involved in their respective governments and politics?

Your Country and You—What the New Testament Really Says

More than a few believers would be surprised to learn that Scripture says little one way or the other about Christian participation in politics, government or even allegiance to their country. Christians get no bonus points for patriotism (see our sidebar “Just What Do You Mean—Patriotism?” on page 13). Rather, the New Testament says that God’s people are “foreigners and strangers” in the world (Hebrews 11:13), and that we are “longing for a better country—a heavenly one” (vs. 16), that our “citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20).

But that does not mean hermit-like disengagement from society. In John 17:14-15, Jesus prays to his Father about his disciples, “...they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.” Elsewhere, Jesus

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clarifies more of what it means to be in but not of the world when he is asked about paying taxes: "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Mark 12:17).

In other words, Christians may hold citizenship in heaven, but that doesn't mean we are excused from shouldering some of the burden of human government. My grandmother interpreted this passage to mean that civic involvement and service was appropriate for Christians.

In 1 Timothy 2:2, the Apostle Paul calls for prayer for "kings and all those in authority"—not just in one's own country. He also calls for compliance with laws and government authority. In Romans 13:1-5 he points out that all authority ultimately derives from God and that

government where torture and summary executions were routine—where debauchery and violence were common among the leadership?

In that day, criticizing Rome or the Emperor would have brought an immediate death sentence for Paul and all Christians, as well as the destruction of Paul's writings. Yet while Paul wisely urged compliance with authority, he did not hesitate to claim his rights as a citizen (Acts 25:11). Roman citizens enjoyed legal privileges not available to other residents of the Empire.

Accordingly, Christians living in the United States and other free countries may exercise their rights, which today include the freedom to dissent—to be critical of government—to elect officials and to change laws. So far so good—but there's the other side of the coin. The U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, speech, the press and assembly—a concept called "pluralism"—co-existence of diverse interests. This means that Muslims, Hindus, atheists and Wiccans can vote, hold office and participate in government just as much as Christians can.

Uh-oh. Awkward. So what's a Christian to do? Stay and fight or take their marbles and just go home? Actually, neither.

In spite of what seems to have been church policy for nearly 1,700 years since Constantine made Christianity a state religion, there is no biblical instruction for Christians to force their will on those of other faiths—or to try to eradicate other faiths. Unlike the old covenant laws prohibiting other religions, the new covenant has no such civil regulations or penalties. Other faiths are no threat to authentic Christianity. The incredibly good news of God's grace is sufficient for Christianity to thrive.

The best scriptural example of Christianity meeting pluralism is found in Acts 17:22-31—the apostle Paul's well-known speech to Athenian citizens and philosophers on Mars Hill, just steps below the imposing pagan temples of the Acropolis. Paul is distressed by the rampant idolatry in the city, but delivers a speech in which he care-

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...no kingdom-of-God citizen should ever place undue trust in any political ideology or program. Nor should they be overly shocked when kingdom-of-the-world leaders or parties act contrary to Christ's ways.

"rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong."

Of course, we can all think of rulers who held plenty of "terror for those who do right"—including Nero, who was probably emperor when Paul was inspired to write this—and Nero's horrific Uncle Caligula who had reigned some 20



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CHURCH AND STATE—AN UNHOLY UNION

Time after time in history, the institutional church has called on human governments to enforce religious dogma, while governments have used the church to further political agendas. All these experiments have turned out as hell-on-earth for the common people. These five examples of religio-political travesties should make us thankful that separation of church and state is one of America's most valued precepts.



312—Roman Emperor Constantine Becomes Christian

In this year Constantine claimed to see a vision of the first two Greek letters of the name "Christ" in the sky, receiving the instruction "By this sign shall you conquer." Shortly afterward, Christianity effectively became the state religion of the empire. Constantine used Christianity to further his power, also realizing that it was in his best interest to crush doctrinal disputes. After the Council of Nicea (325) correctly declared Arianism (which denied the Trinity) heretical, Constantine proclaimed (333) that all Arian writings were to be burned and those who harbored them put to death. Constantine later embarked on several bloody campaigns to "convert" heathens. Many subsequent emperors followed his policies, and the Catholic Church later upheld him as a model for Christian rulers. Yet some recent historians see Constantine as nothing more than a bloody tyrant wearing a cross—the first of many such tyrants.

1095 -- The Crusades

In the 11th Century the Byzantine Empire was threatened by the expansion of the Muslim Seljuk Turks, who had closed Jerusalem to Christian pilgrims. In the West, Pope Gregory VII saw political advantage in uniting all Europe behind a common cause—a "holy war" to recapture the Holy Land from Muslims. Citing Augustine of Hippo's "just war" theory, he gave his blessing and granted indulgences to what would become hundreds of thousands of crusaders over the next two hundred years. Despite early military successes and opening Europe to eastern trade and science, the Crusades eventually proved to be a failure. Estimates of the total number of deaths range from one to nine million. Perhaps two thirds of those were Muslim—and thousands of Jews.



1252—The Inquisition

In the 12th and 13th centuries, new heretical groups were spreading at an alarming rate. While church leaders had heretofore suppressed heresy with considerable force, they needed to turn up the heat. But how, without soiling their vestments in heretical blood? Simple—get the government to do their dirty work. Pope Gregory IX authorized a new and bloody system. Inquisitorial courts collected evidence (extracted by civil authorities using torture) and returned a verdict and sentence, which was carried out by civil authorities. Some estimate the death toll of all inquisitions at tens of thousands, while hundreds of thousands were evicted from homes, imprisoned or tortured.

1541—John Calvin's Geneva

Young French lawyer-turned-reformed-theologian John Calvin had been expelled from Geneva, Switzerland over a disagreement with the city council. Now, four years later, with dwindling church attendance and Catholics threatening to take power, the city needed Calvin's austere leadership. Thus began his 23-year religious police state, in which civil authorities arrested people for myriad offenses (including card-playing, singing, dancing or merely disagreeing with Calvin), church courts judged them and civil authorities sentenced them to often severe penalties—including death.

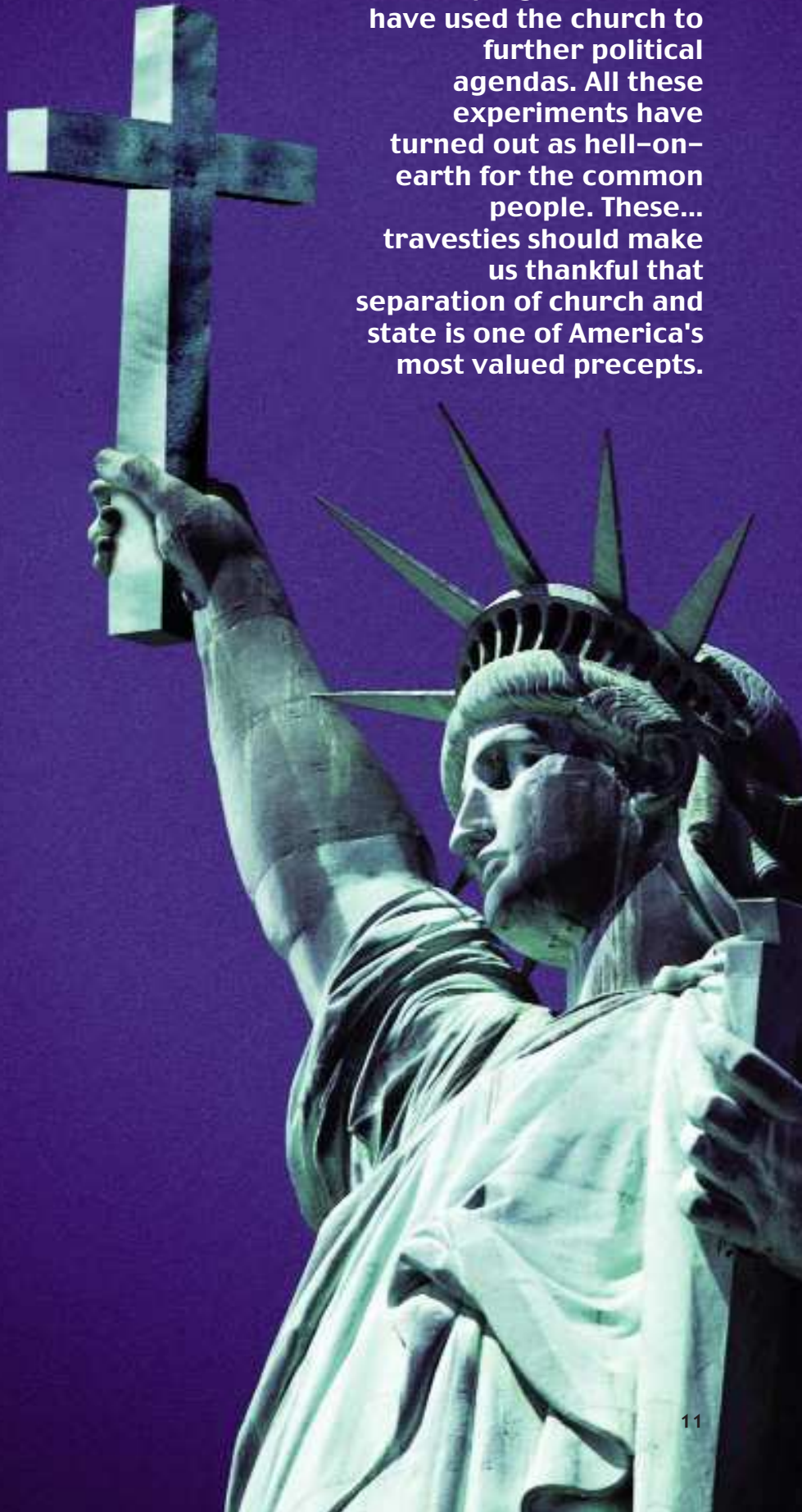


1620—The Massachusetts Bay Colony

The reality of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was far different from the popular Pilgrim myth. Puritans had escaped persecution in England by contracting with the Massachusetts Bay Company to establish colonies from Maine to Rhode Island. As Calvinists, Puritans believed in merging of church and state, so colony directors were steered by church leaders. Religious rules and civil laws were intermingled in a strict Sabbatarian legalism, with harsh punishments. There was little or no tolerance for other beliefs or other Christians. While Catholics were absolutely not welcome, neither were Anglicans, Quakers and Baptists. When four Quakers were executed in Boston, King Charles II had to intervene to protect Quakers from Puritans, who only years earlier had themselves been victims of persecution.



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earth. And since God has given us both the freedom and the necessity to do so, humans must govern themselves. In fact, we cannot not have government.

But what kind? Complain all you want—compared to what we’ve had in ages past, even with all its flaws, the modern democratic forms of government found

in most western nations are gifts from God. They are the best forms of government so far—largely because of the participation of moderate Christians through the centuries. The downside: Com-

posing groups engage in open, productive debate.

When such debates are ideologically driven (as many are today), the practical work of government grinds to a halt. When debates are pragmatic, directed toward practical outcomes and solutions, government is able to do its job.

Here’s a real opportunity for Christians to serve—to be “salt and light” for our fellow human beings. It is precisely because we owe our allegiance to a kingdom that is not of this world that we can bring to the table an objective and Christ-centered perspective on the issues that plague human governments today.

Further, Christians can and do have many differing ideas about how much government we

fully and diplomatically draws from the religious and philosophical traditions of his audience to present the gospel. He does not confront or condemn his audience, but gives the Athenians plenty to think about (and a number of them accepted Christ as a result).

Can Christians today follow Paul’s inspired example of diplomatic interaction with others, while not letting his message become diluted or derailed?

This is a tall order, when we realize that Christian groups historically have had great difficulty getting along with each other.

We Need Government

Obviously, Jesus has not yet set up a physical government here on

...we are just visitors—pilgrims and resident aliens. As Christians, we can waste our short time being exclusivist, polarized and confrontational—but both history and Scripture warn us that approach will backfire in disaster.

pared to authoritarianism, real democracy is complicated, messy and time-consuming, with constant debate among differing parties, special interest groups and religions. That’s because democracy works best when two or more op-

should have. Christians can be politically conservative, liberal, independent and many more labels that we won’t mention. But authentic Christianity will not idolize these positions, as though it is the ultimate solution. The motiva-

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THE PLAIN TRUTH



Just What Do You Mean—Politics?

The word *politics* means “having to do with affairs of state and government.” A broader definition of politics comes from the study of organizational behavior, where politics has been defined as “the acquisition and maintenance of power.” Given this definition, everyone engages in politics at some level, whether we are trying to gain or maintain personal freedom and independence or trying to gain control of a relationship. The quest for and exchange of power is present in nearly every human interaction, for better or worse.

Nearly 2,000 years of church history tell us that Christian institutions are as inclined toward politics as any other. Since politics and the exchange of human power is all around us, we really have little choice but to be aware of it. Jesus tells us to be wise as snakes and harmless as doves (Matthew 10:16)—which implies that we may be aware of the system and even participate in it without compromising our Christianity.

Just What Do You Mean—Patriotism?

According to one dictionary, patriotism is “devoted love, support, and defense of one’s country; national loyalty.” Yet what do we mean by our “country”? A geographical region, its people and politicians? No—what we probably mean is a certain set of values. For the USA, that would include things like freedom, democracy, justice and equality—things that most of us would be hard-pressed to define clearly. At its best, patriotism is a feeling of loyalty and pride in our nation. At its worst, it is blind nationalism. When our country is in conflict with a perceived enemy, political leaders will always engage patriotism to support their military or other agenda—whether it is wise or foolish.

While there is nothing wrong with patriotism and love of country, believers, whose prime allegiance is to Christ, must base their patriotism on love of God and neighbor, rather than on unquestioning nationalism.

Book Review

Hijacked—Responding to the Partisan Church Divide

In their recently released book, Mike Slaughter and Charles Gutenson point to the clear demographic shift in the last 30 years among white evangelicals. What used to be a politically moderate group (historically Democrat, if we go back further) has become solidly and tenaciously conservative.

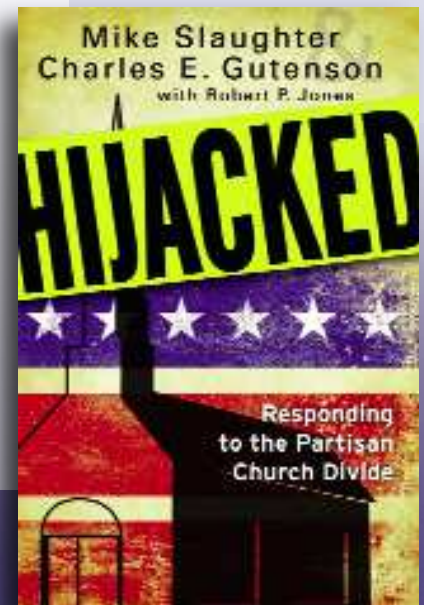
Religious and political identities have become intertwined, and partisan political ideology has hijacked the evangelical church.

As the authors carefully work through these issues, we discover how to discern between politics and the real essentials of Christian faith, and how authentic Christians may hold a wide spectrum of views and disagree, while being unified in Christ.

The authors offer practical suggestions for escaping ideological bubbles, and offer case studies of individuals who have done so and are making a difference.

“We must learn how to participate in the political process while refusing to participate in demeaning, divisive partisanship. We must not allow Christianity to be co-opted by those who would use it to gain political power for themselves” (page 105).

Published this year by Abingdon Press, *Hijacked* is a quick read (136 pages) and may help readers navigate the rocky waters of politics and Christianity.





to make a positive difference in the world. For them, the kingdom of God has become a full reality. Even now they may be sharing apple pie and ice cream at some eternal gathering of my departed relatives. But I'm pretty sure they're not debating politics.

These reflections help to remind me that we are just visitors—pilgrims and resi-

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tion will be love and service (John 13:35), not political ideology.

Gregory Boyd puts it well: "...kingdom-of-God participants must retain a healthy suspicion toward every version of the kingdom of the world—especially their own (for here it is most tempting to become idolatrous)....no kingdom-of-God citizen should ever place undue trust in any political ideology or program. Nor should they be overly shocked when kingdom-of-the-world leaders or parties act contrary to Christ's ways.... however good a particular



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version of the kingdom of the world may be, it does not hold the ultimate answer to the world's problems" (page 55).

Although Uncle Gary and Gramma debated and argued, they didn't let their politics interfere with their friendship. In their own way they each tried

to make a positive difference in the world. As Christians, we can waste our short time being exclusivist, polarized and confrontational—but both history and Scripture warn us that approach will backfire in disaster.

Why not do what Christ followers ought to be able to do best during our brief time here—working together cooperatively with friends—and enemies—for our common good? Why not simply fulfill Jesus' commandment to "love one another"? □

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