

Guarding the Gospel in the Election of 2020

[Steve Bateman](#)

[email](#)

[Twitter](#)

Contents

Introduction	2
Why Write This Now?	3
What is an Evangelical?	5
Theologically Confused and Politically Divided	5
Five Kinds of Evangelicals	6
The Justice Evangelicals	6
The Long-Game Evangelicals	7
The Centrist Evangelicals	10
The Last Chance Evangelicals	10
The Nationalist Evangelicals	11
Dangers Inherent in Each Position	12
Dangers for Justice Evangelicals	12
Dangers for Long-Game Evangelicals	14
Dangers for Centrist Evangelicals	14
Dangers for Last Chance Evangelicals	15
Dangers for Nationalist Evangelicals	15
Conclusion: What Should We Then Do?	17

Guarding the Gospel in the Election of 2020

Christianity is at once conservative and progressive. When Paul told Timothy to “[guard](#) the deposit entrusted to you,” he was charging Timothy to conserve the teaching he received from Paul and the other apostles regarding Jesus Christ. He is responsible to pass this treasure of truth to the next generation. Neither Timothy, nor anyone else, is authorized to revise it in order to make it more palatable for contemporary tastes. His job is to conserve it and protect it with his life. Though we no longer have the apostles living among us, we do have their teaching preserved in Scripture, the final authority for those who follow Christ. In this sense, all Christians must be conservatives. We have a precious treasure of truth to *conserve*.

But the teaching of Christ’s apostles challenges every political power structure on the earth. The cardinal command to [love our neighbor](#) challenges every injustice, including the evils of partiality, oppression, racism, murder, pride, greed, theft, bribery, boastfulness, sexual exploitation, lying, stealing, and neglecting the poor. Jesus and the apostles soberly remind every politician and government official that they will [give an account](#) to the Judge of the universe for the way they used, or abused, their power. These are the sorts of things that powerholders rarely want to hear. The world as it is, is not the world as it should be. In this sense, all Christians must be progressives. In this world filled with hate and injustice, we can never be satisfied with the *status quo* as we constantly push to make *progress*.

Jesus taught his disciples to [pray](#) for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. In heaven, there is perfect peace as every creature gladly obeys the just laws of the Creator. Since that is not yet the case on earth, we have much room for progress. Jesus tells his followers to bring relief to those who hunger and thirst, whether for spiritual or physical nourishment. Consequently, throughout history wherever authentic Christianity advanced, it established not only churches, but schools, hospitals, orphanages, and social reform. Sadly, corruption often crept into the church and throughout history professing Christians have displayed hateful and unjust conduct. No one is more displeased with this failure than Christ himself, who had a good deal to say about religious [hypocrites](#). In praying and working for God’s will to be done on earth, Christ’s followers bring reform to our world, replacing hate with love and injustice with justice, in their role as [peacemakers](#).

At the center of our conserved truth is the cross. At the cross, we see the demonstration of the purest love and the greatest of all transactions. On the cross, a totally innocent man, being [fully God](#), took on himself the guilt of sinners, received the full punishment we deserve, [satisfying the righteous wrath](#) of a holy God. On the cross, Jesus, being perfectly obedient to the laws of God throughout his entire life on earth, was accepted by the Father as the only qualified substitute for [sinners](#) like us. To prove that his payment for our sin was accepted by the Father, God raised Jesus from the dead, providing objective, verifiable, and falsifiable [historical evidence](#) for the Christian faith and the assurance that justice was satisfied. His death, burial, and resurrection form the [core](#) of the gospel, the good news. Christ has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Our only hope of receiving God’s forgiveness and being adopted into his eternal family is to trust in [Christ alone](#).

While this is good news, it is the *only* good news. God offers [no other way](#) to be reconciled to himself but through Christ alone. So, Christ the King [commands](#) us to take the message of the cross to the world and persuade others to believe in him, surrender to him, and follow after him.

That is not to say the world will warmly receive the good news. The world is already skeptical of such claims and considers the message of the cross to be [foolish](#). Why should they listen to us? Why should they weigh the audacious claims of Christianity instead of summarily dismissing them?

Jesus [told his disciples](#) to be so genuinely engaged in honorable acts of love and kindness that people would turn their attention to him, consider his claims, and believe in him. His followers are

called to live their lives in a way that removes every unnecessary obstacle between their unbelieving friends and the risen Lord. Therefore, a non-negotiable priority for a Christian is to glorify God by persuading others to follow Christ, making every sacrifice and using every ethical means to evangelize the world.

Why Write This Now?

I write these words to my fellow evangelicals, but I welcome all non-evangelicals who are trying to understand us to read along. The professing Christian I have just described, simultaneously conservative and progressive, is an evangelical. Or at least, this is what we used to mean by the term “evangelical.” An evangelical is someone who is submitted to the authority of Scripture, centered on the cross of Christ, and sent to the world with the gospel. When the gospel is received, lives are transformed, and society is reformed. But today, the term evangelical is more closely associated with either a political movement to be opposed or a voting bloc to be pursued. And at nearly [23%](#) of the population, evangelicals represent a sizable voting bloc. Among contemporary evangelicals, the seeking of self-serving power is replacing the call to self-denying service. Instead of opposing the world’s hateful and irrational tactics in public discourse, too many self-identifying evangelicals have adopted them. In the process, they are destroying their credibility, and by extension, the credibility of all of us who still own the name, “evangelical.”

I have two concerns as we approach the presidential election of 2020. The first is doctrinal purity. Through the Trojan Horse of partisan politics, corrupt theology is smuggled into the church. The second is church unity. The [enemy’s tactic](#) from the beginning has been to divide and conquer. He aims to divide us from God and each other. Division distracts from the mission that evangelicals have historically seen as their priority: glorifying God through world evangelization. “Evangelical” is from a Greek word that means “good news.” In its verb form, it means “to proclaim or announce good news.” Evangelicals are people who evangelize because they believe that glorifying God by proclaiming the good news, the gospel, is among our highest God-given priorities.

To address these two concerns, doctrinal purity and church unity, we cannot avoid a sustained reflection on our nation’s history. I have always enjoyed the robust discussions that happen at the intersection of theology, American history, and politics. I focused my [master’s thesis, doctoral dissertation](#), and [first book](#) on the state of theology in the churches of America immediately prior to the American Revolution and contemplated the church’s impact on the worldviews of our nation’s founding fathers. I love my country, its flag, and its founding documents. And I love its history. Except when I don’t.

There are two errors to avoid in reviewing our nation’s past. The first is to view the United States as exceptionally righteous by focusing on our strengths and downplaying our national sins. The second is to view the United States as exceptionally wicked by focusing on our national sins and ignoring our moral leadership in the world. The real story is more complicated and historical revisionism in either direction leads us astray.

The first freedom guaranteed in the Bill of Rights includes my liberty, as the pastor of a local church, to speak publicly about the issues of the day as I equip followers of Christ to think, speak, and act in a way that glorifies God. The “free exercise” clause of the First Amendment prohibits the government from telling me what I can and cannot preach. Among other things, the First Amendment protects the free speech of the two institutions in society best suited to speak truth to power and hold our government accountable: the church and the press. A free church informs the collective moral conscience of our citizens while a free press provides a constant flow of the information and exchange of ideas necessary for a self-governing people to make wise political decisions.

While contemporary Americans may deny the necessity of the church to nurture our national virtue in the 21st century, the consensus of the Founders was that the church's role was [indispensable](#) to the formation of our national character. They believed that this experiment in self-government would only succeed if the citizens of America were virtuous and educated. From its founding, America needed a free church and a free press to function. In obedience to Scripture and in line with American tradition, I have freely and publicly prayed for, commended, and criticized every president, Republican and Democrat, for the last three decades in an effort to demonstrate how to think Biblically about the issues of the day.

A month before the presidential election of 2016, a friend of mine, Collin Hansen wrote an [opinion piece](#) for the Washington Post in which he argued that the upcoming election was exposing not only the deep racial divides in our country but a chasm between older and younger evangelicals. In particular, younger evangelicals observed the enthusiastic and uncritical support of older evangelicals for Donald Trump and noted the inconsistency with the way they had evaluated past presidential candidates. By doing so, older evangelicals forfeited their credibility and moral authority in what appeared to be a display of hypocrisy. Since younger evangelicals are already under tremendous cultural pressure to abandon several central teachings of Christianity, this was not going to help or encourage them to stand firm in the faith.

I found the piece engaging and thought-provoking, especially because I am greatly burdened for the rising generation (the generation of my own children) so I posted it on Facebook and recommended it to my Facebook "friends." I did not expect what happened next. I received responses from professing Christians that were angry, sarcastic, and marked by personal attacks. The same thing happened on a much larger scale to Collin Hansen and one of the evangelical leaders he interviewed for the piece. It was clear then that Donald Trump would be a polarizing figure, not only in our country, but in our churches. I was attempting to evaluate Donald Trump by the same Biblical standards by which I have evaluated every presidential candidate before him. But this time, the response from many of my fellow evangelicals was going to be different.

Evangelicals are not monolithic in their views on the upcoming election or on politics in general. Is there room for disagreement? Is it possible to love one another, uphold sound doctrine, maintain our unity, and stay focused on our God-given objectives as a church even while we differ in our political opinions? I believe we can, but it will require us to listen carefully in good faith and humility to one another. We are called to do the hard work of understanding why someone would take a different view than ours. *The purpose of this paper is to equip our church to guard the gospel and preserve our integrity during the election of 2020.* To do that, we need to objectively consider the wide range of political opinions among the people who call themselves evangelicals.

What is an evangelical?

Historian David Bennington [summarizes four primary distinctives](#) of evangelicals:

- Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a "born again" experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus.
- Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts.
- Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority.
- Crucicentrism: the stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity.

In conducting research, [pollsters](#) identify an evangelical as someone who strongly agrees with these four statements, which have some overlap with the distinctives above:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation.

This leaves a considerable latitude for who can be included as an evangelical, crossing denominational lines and gathering up many of the strains of Christianity that arose out of the Protestant Reformation: Reformed, Holiness, Anabaptist, Pentecostal, and Charismatic.

Theologically Confused and Politically Divided

In national polls, many people who identify as evangelicals are theologically illiterate and often heretical. For example, 30% of “evangelicals” believe that [Jesus is not God](#). In another [survey](#), 65% of evangelicals agreed with the statement that “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” The heretical notion that Jesus is a created being is resurrected in every generation, but this generation seems to be having a hard time dispatching it. The deity of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity are essential doctrines of historic, apostolic Christianity. That 30% of professing evangelicals do not believe in this essential of Christian doctrine should cause us to seriously question not only their salvation, but their judgment on other issues as well. Including political issues.

In addition to being theologically confused, today's evangelicals are politically divided. While exit polls in 2016 showed that [81%](#) of evangelicals voted for Donald Trump, that apparent solidarity is [more complicated](#) under the surface. Many evangelicals unenthusiastically voted for Trump as the lesser of two evils. Many others are nominal evangelicals who identify more with the politics of evangelicals than with the actual practices and doctrinal distinctives of the historic evangelical movement. Still others attend church regularly but based on their theological response to polls on Biblical literacy, their churches and pastors have failed them. Many of them have never read widely or thought deeply about the intersection of Christian theology and political philosophy. Their main information sources are sound bites and hit pieces from cable news and social media.

As we approach the presidential election of 2020, I see at least five kinds of evangelicals. That is not to say there are no other kinds of evangelicals. For example, there are probably Libertarian Evangelicals, but their numbers seem to be few. Also, there will be a great deal of overlap in these categories. Someone might see themselves in agreement with two or more of them. There are important truths and dangerous traps in each category. But these five categories seem to capture most evangelicals in 2020.

Five Kinds of Evangelicals

The Justice Evangelicals	The Long-Game Evangelicals	The Centrist Evangelicals	The Last Chance Evangelicals	The Nationalist Evangelicals
Vote Biden America Is Egypt	Vote Biden Character Matters	Vote According To Your Biblically Informed Conscience	Vote Trump Policy Matters	Vote Trump America is Israel

Let's look at each category in more detail.

1. The Justice Evangelicals

Justice Evangelicals are mindful of Scripture's many admonitions, as well as Jesus' example, to care for the poor, the sick, the widow, the orphan, the fatherless, the prisoner, the oppressed, the immigrant, the homeless, and all victims of injustice. They are also mindful that since our founding, the United States has been guilty of large-scale injustice against Native American, African American, and Hispanic American people in particular. While much of this historical injustice has been rectified through a Civil War, Constitutional amendments, Supreme Court decisions, and legislation, the residual effect of the past remains in the form of systemic racism and unequal treatment under the law. For a video primer on the present consequences of our past injustices, see [here](#) and [here](#).

These evangelicals have witnessed or experienced an inconsistent application of Biblical truth in evangelical churches, especially [regarding race](#), and they are largely disillusioned. They have detected [racist undertones](#) in the rhetoric of Donald Trump and policies that [favor white](#) Americans. They have noted the long-term and troubling ties between the white evangelical church and the Republican Party, the mutual pandering between politicians and preachers, the seduction of political power and its corrupting influence on the church.

Justice Evangelicals observe that the majority of evangelicals in America, especially in the South, did not largely engage in political activism to [end slavery](#) in the 19th century or advocate for [civil rights](#) in the 20th century under the guise that the church should stay out of politics and focus on preaching the gospel. However, in the late 20th century, largely in response to *Roe v. Wade* (1973) white evangelicals suddenly found their political voice in protesting the injustice of abortion. Justice Evangelicals argue that to be consistently pro-life, we must protest not only the oppression of unborn human life, but also the oppression of born human life. For them, the failure of white evangelicals to recognize and oppose the systemic racism that fuels racial injustice and generational poverty is viewed as self-serving hypocrisy.

Justice Evangelicals hold that the United States, though uniquely blessed by God, is not the promised land. The promises of God to Israel during the Mosaic Covenant should not be directly applied to the United States. For example, the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14: "if my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." While many evangelicals

lift this verse from its context and apply it to the United States, Justice Evangelicals tend avoid this error.

Justice Evangelicals note that white Christians historically tend to see the United States as the Promised Land, a place of peace, prosperity, and the American Dream. Many professing Christians believe that if America does the right thing, God is obligated by this Old Testament covenantal promise to do right by us, heal our land, blessing us with health and wealth, peace and prosperity. Typically, if America is not doing well, white evangelicals tend to believe that the cause of God's judgment (and the need for forgiveness) is other people's sin: communists, Marxists, atheists who take prayer out of schools, liberals, socialists, drug dealers, people who won't stand for the national anthem, abortionists, and practicing homosexuals. But Justice Evangelicals are attempting to cast light on evangelical blind spots.

For example, black Christians have historically not experienced America as the Promised Land. They are more likely to view the United States as Egypt and the Wilderness rather than Israel. Egypt represents a place where God's people were enslaved and oppressed. The Wilderness represents a post-slavery wandering in deprivation and sorrow. Consequently, the political slogan, "Make America Great Again" resonated with white evangelicals who were sentimentally yearning for a time when they seemed to have more cultural dominance. In those days of greatness (and higher rates of church attendance), they experienced much less hostility from society. But the same phrase evoked a different reaction in black Christians who had no desire to go back to either the 1960's or the 1860's. For black Americans at the end of the second term of the first African-American President, America had never been better.

Given the racial tension in our nation, Justice Evangelicals are alarmed that President Trump does not seem to be able or willing to make the sort of public statements that tend to bring calm and invite reconciliation. Rather, his words, or lack of them, often serve to [escalate](#) the conflict and [further distance](#) black Americans from the Republican Party which currently has only one African-American member serving in the [Senate](#) and none in the [House](#). At times, President Trump has been strangely [hesitant](#) to clearly distance himself from white supremacy groups that seem to [support](#) him.

Younger evangelicals are generally more concerned about racial justice and are therefore more likely to vote for Democratic candidates in 2020. Like their unbelieving peers, they view Donald Trump as a divisive political figure whose policies and rhetoric continue to exacerbate racial division in the United States. Furthermore, because the majority of the white evangelical church has been strongly in favor of Donald Trump, many younger evangelicals are moving out of the evangelical camp in reaction to what they perceive to be a gross hypocrisy.

Particularly appealing to young evangelicals, and other evangelicals moving leftward, is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) organization. Many, if not most, evangelicals are quick to renounce the [sin of racism](#) (as they understand it) and affirm the proposition that black lives matter. Black people bear the image of God and are equal in value, worth, and dignity in his sight. Ethnocentric pride, partiality, and injustice in every form are damnable offenses in the eyes of a holy God who commands us to love our neighbors. Anyone with a basic understanding of Christian doctrine can affirm the truth that black lives matter, but evangelicals have largely affirmed the truth without acting on it. Justice Evangelicals are particularly concerned about the injustices, past and present, experienced by the African-American community and want to actually do something about it.

2. The Long Game Evangelicals

Long-game evangelicals believe that the best hope for the conservative movement, which they view as most amenable to important issues like protecting the unborn, religious liberty, economic prosperity, and racial justice, is to remove Donald Trump from the presidency. They are willing to

concede the presidential election of 2020 to Joe Biden, in an effort to purge Trumpism (which they see as a cult of personality) from the Republican Party.

This strategy is risky, but it takes the long view. An analogy from football would be the team that finds itself deep in their own territory on fourth and long in the second quarter. Sometimes it's better to punt than to go for it in order to regroup for a later run at the endzone. Long Game Evangelicals also note that the American economy can prosper [under Democratic Presidents](#) and the abortion rate has been in [consistent decline since 1980](#) [regardless](#) of whether a Republican or Democrat is in the Oval Office. Furthermore, under Trump, funding for Planned Parenthood has increased and Planned Parenthood has performed a [record number of abortions](#).

As Donald Trump's popularity grew during the 2016 primaries, a group of Republicans opposed him on the grounds that Trump's ascendancy would set back the conservative movement. In addition to many of the objections raised by The Justice Evangelicals, they voiced other concerns. Sometimes known as "Never Trumpers," they argued that Donald Trump was not a principled conservative with a track record of articulating and defending core conservative ideals. Rather, he was a pragmatic and opportunistic populist who adopted some key conservative principles in order to cobble together a voting base that would put him in the most powerful position in the world. In particular, Trump knew that he needed the evangelical vote to win. Therefore, he adopted key policies and courted influential evangelical leaders to attract evangelical support.

Trump, the experienced showman and artful dealmaker, had no reservations in using the [Bible as a prop](#), as he would do [again](#) for the 2020 election. Among other things, even though he had been pro-choice most of his life, he declared himself to be pro-life only when he was considering a run for the presidency [in 2012](#). In one of the shrewder tactics of his campaign, he offered a list of names of potential judges he would appoint to the Supreme Court if elected. All of the potential jurists were conservatives who would most likely be pro-life and pro-religious liberty.

Nonetheless, "Never Trumpers" viewed Trump as an existential threat to the conservative movement if he became the leader of the Republican Party. In their assessment, Donald Trump did not have the temperamental, intellectual, or moral fitness required of the office of President. At the time, every Republican candidate for president in the primaries agreed with them and said so in interviews and on the debate stage. Donald Trump was widely known to be dishonest, arrogant, boastful, and promiscuous, even [bragging](#) about sexually assaulting women. In fact, leading Republicans such as Ted Cruz, Lindsay Graham, and Marco Rubio are on record, prior to Trump's election, as being [in agreement](#) with that assessment of Trump's character. After the election, in an apparent effort to save their political careers, they revised their public assessment of Donald Trump in Trump's favor. Many of them have been [flattering](#) Donald Trump ever since.

Several, but not many, influential evangelicals agreed with the "Never Trumpers" on key issues. Historically, evangelicals had emphasized that in selecting a candidate, "character matters." No reasonable evangelical expected a perfect president or even a godly one. But the President of the United States, as Commander-in-Chief of the greatest military in the world, must at least meet the moral qualifications of a first year cadet at West Point: "[A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal or tolerate those who do.](#)" Most evangelicals do not expect to elect a Pastor-in-Chief, but many of them still expect to elect a reasonably honorable person.

When the Democrat Bill Clinton was caught in a sexual scandal in 1998, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a [resolution](#) entitled "Resolution of the Moral Character of Public Officials" in which they boldly affirmed that

"moral character matters to God and should matter to all citizens, especially to God's people, when choosing public leaders; and...we implore our government leaders to live by the highest

standards of morality both in their private actions and in their public duties, and thereby serve as models of moral excellence and character...”

Similarly, evangelicals joined other political conservatives who freely criticized the Democrat Barak Obama, not only on policy issues, but character issues, like playing too much golf, or his wife’s [sleeveless dresses](#), or lying about the provisions of Obamacare, or corruption in his administration. But suddenly, when it came to the Republican Donald Trump, it seemed that to most evangelicals, character no longer mattered. This glaring double standard has not gone [unnoticed](#).

Frequently, Donald Trump says, tweets, or does something for which evangelicals would have excoriated Barak Obama. For example, if there was credible evidence that Barak Obama paid [hush money](#) during his campaign to women who made their living from pornography and claimed to have had an affair with him, evangelicals would not have hesitated to publicly declare that he did not possess the moral fitness to hold the office of president. If Barak Obama had [publicly lied](#) or used [public profanity](#) or [publicly boasted](#) or even [played golf](#) to the degree that Donald Trump has done, evangelicals who support Trump today would have quickly judged Obama to be unfit. If Barak Obama had populated his staff and closest advisors with family members who could financially benefit in the business world from their White House connections, white evangelicals would have accused him of [nepotism](#). If Barak Obama had publicly [insulted a war hero](#) who had been awarded three bronze stars and two purple hearts, most evangelicals would have been incensed. If Barak Obama had refused to [release tax returns](#), as every President since Jimmy Carter has done, white evangelicals would have voiced strong suspicions and a presumption of financial malfeasance. Instead, many leading evangelicals did and continue to [excuse and enable](#) Donald Trump’s dishonorable behavior.

Long Game Evangelicals believe that when many white evangelicals used two different standards to judge a black president and a white president, they only fueled the speculation that most evangelicals are, to put it charitably, indifferent to the problem of racism in America. The overwhelming support of white evangelicals for Donald Trump only [increased the divide](#) between white and black evangelicals. Especially since the white president had lied multiple times by [fueling a conspiracy theory](#) that Barak Obama was not born in the United States, thereby delegitimizing the presidency of the first African-American president in our history.

Attaching evangelical concerns like pro-life, pro-traditional marriage, pro-family, and pro-religious liberty policies to a man who possesses the character of the thrice-married Donald Trump was a bridge [too far for many evangelicals](#) who recognized that to do so was [inconsistent](#) with their prior public stands. In 2016, they either voted for Hillary Clinton, did not vote, or they wrote in a suitable candidate. These evangelicals now find themselves in the position of thinking about the long game.

Whether their strategy proves to be effective or not, Long Game Evangelicals are not conceding the 2020 election out of hatred for America. They are deeply concerned that our national polarization and undermining of institutions are accelerated under a Trump presidency in way that jeopardizes our Republic and prevents the next generation from adopting political conservatism. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, “[divided we fall.](#)” Better to punt now and re-group for 2024.

More importantly, an evangelical who takes this position may do so because he or she is more concerned about the advance of the gospel and the worldwide fame of Jesus than they are about grabbing and maintaining political power and special treatment by the government. To them, retaining the White House is [not worth sacrificing our integrity](#) and reputations as ambassadors of the King of Kings. They are concerned that the church is in danger of [political idolatry](#) which destroys our [Christian witness](#).

3. The Centrist Evangelicals

Centrist Evangelicals are committed to keeping the core evangelical distinctives central to church life. Like all true practicing evangelicals, they are concerned with the glory of God, the exaltation of Jesus, the advance of the gospel, and the authority of Scripture, traditional core principles of [evangelicalism](#). Becoming entangled in partisan politics only distracts from those priorities. Because they share many of the concerns of evangelicals to the left and right of them, they are often criticized from both sides of the political spectrum.

Therefore, many evangelical pastors and leaders of evangelical institutions have chosen not to publicly endorse any candidate in the 2020 election. For many of them, this is a practice they have followed in every election. It is not that they do not have a personal and principled opinion, but they do not believe that their role is to direct God's people on which particular candidate they should choose. This is not necessarily due to cowardice on their part, but to their understanding of their calling.

Centrist Evangelicals have noted how political partisanship has contributed to the shift away from traditional evangelical core values and some question whether the term evangelical is [redeemable](#). But Centrist Evangelicals believe that by faithfully preaching the Word without advocating for one political party or the other, God's people are equipped to think Biblically about the issues of the day, including the cultural issues that surround a presidential election, and to vote for the common good.

The Bible simply does not tell the Christian whether or not to vote for Joe Biden or Donald Trump. The Bible never mentions voting at all since democratic, self-governing, sovereign nation-states did not exist in Bible times. And Joe Biden and Donald Trump are names not found among the many names in Scripture.

However, there are timeless principles in Scripture that do indeed inform the believer's decision-making process in the political sphere. Also, there are moral issues that the Bible clearly addresses. Therefore, Centrist Evangelicals do not shirk their duty to teach sound doctrine regarding the sanctity of life, the offense of racism and ethnocentric pride, the abomination of white supremacy, the abuse of power, the priority of character in leadership, the vocation of marriage, the practice of justice, the sin of partiality, remembering the poor, sexual ethics, verbal integrity, compassion for the immigrant, and a host of other pertinent issues. In being faithful to preach the Word, they will often find themselves [in conflict with both](#) Republican and Democratic partisans. By not attaching themselves to either party through a public endorsement of a particular candidate, they seek to maintain an independence that is required when speaking [unpopular but necessary truth](#).

Centrist Evangelicals will attempt to be balanced in their views, weighing the arguments on both sides. After listening carefully to conservatives and progressives, they may resist the pressure from others to give a public "hot take," because they understand that sometimes we speak the loudest about the-issue-of-the-day by saying nothing.

4. Last Chance Evangelicals

Last Chance Evangelicals see that the trajectory and velocity of change in our society is racing toward a culture that is exceedingly hostile and intolerant towards Biblical Christianity. So while they would prefer another candidate, they believe the platform of the Republican Party represents the greatest hope for stemming the tide and protecting religious freedom. They are willing to acknowledge and then overlook Donald Trump's character deficiencies in order to support policies they believe will be best for America. In 2020, these evangelicals will publicly endorse Donald Trump.

While they may wish that we had a more honorable candidate, they see the bold statements of the Democratic Party platform and recognize that the alternative to Donald Trump, Joe Biden, has even greater negative consequences. In this dilemma, the policy of the candidate matters more than his character. In essence, they are casting their vote for policies and [platforms](#) rather than a personality.

As they observe a culture in moral rebellion against God, they predict dark days ahead. They recognize that the Democratic Party has moved much farther to the left in recent years and that if they capture the White House, the religious liberty protected by the First Amendment will be in jeopardy. This is especially pertinent given that the next one or two Supreme Court appointments will shift the balance of power one way or another for years to come.

Religious liberty issues range from tax exemptions of churches, to the right of Christian universities to hire professors who subscribe to sound doctrine, to Christian [business owners](#) who do not want to support abortion through the healthcare they provide employees. These are real and significant threats to the church and evangelicals are rightly concerned about them.

The Last Chance Evangelicals believe that the election of Donald Trump may be our last chance, at least in this generation, to stop the leftward lurch and guard the First Amendment rights that have allowed the church in America to flourish for over two centuries. Once the Democrats gain control of the White House, they believe, the cultural shift may be irreversible.

For this reason, Last Chance Evangelicals honestly acknowledge the moral shortcomings of Donald Trump but view him as an unwitting instrument in the hands of God to restrain evil, bring relief to [the unborn](#), and protect the church. They normally do not over-praise or flatter President Trump, and some of them will hold him accountable for his misconduct.

To use another football analogy, imagine playing on the same team with a super-talented but super-boastful running back whose carelessness with the football often results in turnovers and whose endzone celebrations often result in penalties. While you are pulling for his success, you can also be rightly indignant because his antics hurt your team. For many evangelicals, they view Donald Trump as a political teammate who could do so much better, accomplish so much more good, if he humbled himself, [submitted to wise counsel](#), and did what was necessary to persuade those beyond his base to come play on our team.

Last Chance Evangelicals are willing to give credit where credit is due, like these “[Thirty Good Things President Trump Has Done For America.](#)” At the same time, those who are most faithful to the Scriptures are equally willing to criticize President Trump when he is wrong, and apply the same standard they have applied to past presidents. However, some of these Last Chance Evangelicals were Long Game Evangelicals [four years ago](#), and their switch is viewed by some as a [suspicious defection](#).

For the most part, Last Chance Evangelicals have a clearer understanding of the discontinuity between Israel and the Church and are careful not to apply 2 Chronicles 7:14 to the United States. They recognize, along with the Long Game Evangelicals and Centrist Evangelicals, that we, as Christians in the United States, are God’s people [in Babylon, not Jerusalem](#). And like God’s people in exile, we are to “[seek the welfare](#)” of the nation where we live as “[sojourners and exiles](#).” They believe that of the two options, voting for Trump is a vote for the common good of our nation and the best hope for a just peace in our polarized society. Though some Last Chance Evangelicals seem overly [optimistic](#) about Trump’s administration, their decision to cast a vote for Donald Trump is a pragmatic recognition that this is the world we live in and sometimes we are not always presented with ideal options. Sometimes we must choose the lesser of two evils.

5. The Nationalist Evangelicals

Nationalist Evangelicals love their country. They love its flag, its songs, its ideals, and its traditions. They are weary of America-bashing and they do not hesitate to stand up in defense of our military,

the police, and law and order. They do this because they believe that America is still worth fighting for and America is worth fighting for because of its Judeo-Christian roots.

While Justice Evangelicals may downplay or even deny the influence of Biblical Christianity on our nation's founders, Constitution, and laws, Nationalist Evangelicals bring some correction to that kind of historical revisionism. Nationalist Evangelicals see abuses in entitlement programs that seem to contradict the Biblical work ethic, incentivize fatherlessness, raise taxes, devalue personal moral responsibility, and destabilize our economy. Regarding immigration, they desire reform that is both compassionate toward immigrants and cognizant of the right of a sovereign nation to secure its borders. To this end, they call for a return to an immigration process that welcomes immigrants but emphasizes their assimilation into American culture, nurturing them to learn the English language, love the ideals of the Constitution, appreciate our history, and then prove their loyalty by pursuing citizenship. They are weary of unfair trade deals and the exporting of American jobs. And for holding these views, Nationalist Evangelicals resent being labeled as racists and bigots.

Nationalist Evangelicals have often felt betrayed or neglected by both the Democratic Party and past Republican administrations, and they are averse to elitism. They view Donald Trump as a man of the people who speaks his mind, gets things done, stands up to our enemies, negotiates deals, pushes back against a biased media, and fights corruption as he “drains the swamp” in Washington. Among Nationalist Evangelicals he is highly esteemed as a champion, a hero, a rescuer, a protector. He is considered by many Nationalist Evangelicals to be the only person on the political landscape who can deliver us from our enemies, both foreign and domestic.

Nationalist Evangelicals are firmly entrenched in what is often referred to as Donald Trump's base. Their support is enthusiastic and partisan. They are fiercely loyal to Donald Trump and are exceedingly quick to defend him against any criticism, even when the criticism comes from evangelical leaders they have trusted in the past. They are also quick to believe every good thing they hear or read about him, being prone to give him the benefit of the doubt.

While Justice Evangelicals might favor the book of James and its rebuke of the rich who exploit the poor, Nationalist Evangelicals might favor the book of Romans and its rebuke of anarchists who resist authority. The Apostle Paul describes all public officials as [instruments](#) in the hand of God, even if the official doesn't acknowledge it. Public officials are authorized by God to wield the sword of the state, striking fear in the hearts of evildoers and restraining evil in society. While violent protests unfold on their television screens, Nationalist Evangelicals view Donald Trump as that instrument, chosen by God, to protect the American people and restore law and order to her cities.

Dangers Inherent In Each Position

1. Dangers for Justice Evangelicals

There is a justified hesitancy on the part of many evangelicals to fully endorse the Black Lives Matter (BLM) organization because BLM goes beyond merely calling for equal justice for African-Americans under the law. In addition, BLM affirms an [activist agenda](#) aimed at undermining the traditional nuclear family that has formed the basis of Western Civilization, being built around the institution of marriage as Jesus [defined](#) it: the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union designed by God to last as long as they both shall live. Evangelicals are not alone in this concern and find much common ground with their [Roman Catholic](#) friends. Given the social, financial, [educational](#), and emotional [benefits](#) of [marriage](#) thus defined, a [good case](#) could be made that further erosion of the nuclear family is one of the things that black lives [need least](#) right now. Therefore, thoughtful

evangelicals will distinguish between BLM, the organization, and the very Biblical truth that [black lives matter](#).

Justice Evangelicals can be susceptible to the trendiest theories coming out of the social sciences, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality which views the world through a racial lens and divides the world into the oppressed and oppressors. To a large degree, CRT moves the focus from individual responsibility to social structures that need to be dismantled and replaced. In particular, CRT is most concerned with the social structures they view as created and maintained by [white supremacy](#). While CRT might serve as a useful descriptive tool in understanding some of the realities of racial divides in our nation, its prescriptive features are largely anti-Biblical, seeing historic Christianity as a giant obstacle to be removed in order for an egalitarian, inclusive, just society to evolve. By placing [“race at the center of human identity”](#) CRT invalidates the New Testament teaching that in Christ, race is not a controlling identity. And finally, in the supposed aim to equally empower the powerless, CRT advocates may end up grabbing power and oppressing a different group of people. They will simply [replace](#) the current “oppressors” (i.e., white, male, cisgender, Christian), with another class of “oppressors.”

Of all evangelicals, Justice Evangelicals have the most negative view of America. Their frequent criticism of Donald Trump can be vitriolic and hateful. Just as Donald Trump’s ardent fans can see no wrong in him, some Justice Evangelicals can see no right. They can be vulnerable to confirmation bias, limiting their media sources to news organizations that are consistently anti-Trump, and often anti-America. Being unwilling to acknowledge any positive accomplishment by the Trump administration, their tactics sometimes slip into the same verbal carelessness (lies, rudeness, insults, personal attacks, name-calling, unfounded accusations, assigning motive, and a host of logical fallacies) that are used by their political opponents.

Justice Evangelicals can slip into an ill-informed hatred for America that ignores how a sovereign God has raised up the United States to bless the nations of the world. While many of our Founders were shamefully wrong on slavery, they managed to produce some of the most brilliant political documents in history that paved the way for slavery’s abolition. Older Americans recall the great sacrifices made during World War II that resulted in the [Pax Americana](#), an enduring peace and prosperity in Europe and North America for the last seventy years. After defeating Germany and Japan, America did not permanently occupy these nations, but helped them rebuild their economies and return the government to their people.

Though there are notable abuses, perhaps no nation has ever possessed so much military strength and shown such great restraint in using it. With all of its despicable flaws and inconsistencies, the United States has aspired to guard the basic civil rights and personal freedoms of its diverse citizens for over two centuries. No nation receives [more legal immigrants](#) than the United States or gives more in [foreign aid](#) to the poorest nations of the earth. There are good reasons why so many people in the world, of all races and religions, still long to leave their homelands and move to America, and those reasons should be acknowledged.

Another danger of this leftward movement is that the line between the [inclusiveness taught in Scripture](#) and the inclusiveness taught in the Democratic Party Platform begins to blur. Progressive politicians who directly contradict Biblical teaching on gender, sex, marriage, and family, have effectively [conflated](#) these concerns with the civil rights issue of racial justice. Younger evangelicals are increasingly [vulnerable to clever arguments](#) that seem to give God’s blessing to same sex marriage. Furthermore, there is seemingly no room in the [Democratic tent](#) for anyone who believes that unborn babies are human beings, made in the image of God and endowed by their Creator with the right to

life. Historically, the [founder](#) of Planned Parenthood, the largest abortion provider in the United States, gave the strong impression that black lives matter less than others. From the evangelical perspective, BLM is not entirely accurate in their assertions that black lives matter since they maintain a pro-choice position while [black babies are disproportionately aborted](#)

Finally, if they are not vigilant, Justice Evangelicals may jettison other currently unpopular Christian doctrines, such as the [exclusive claims](#) of the gospel along with the Biblical definition of [marriage](#), and the authority of Scripture itself as they begin a journey out of the church of their youth into “ex-evangelicalism.”

2. Dangers for Long Game Evangelicals

Long Game Evangelicals are taking a risk in handing over the reins of government to a Democratic Party that is probably [more secular](#) and hostile to historic Christianity than it has ever been. Through legislation and judicial appointments, if Democrats follow their stated intentions, protection for the unborn and [religious freedom](#) will likely both be restricted. Specifically regarding abortion, presidents [do seem to matter](#). Furthermore, while Donald Trump’s character is the main issue for Long Game Evangelicals, Joe Biden has a [history](#) of [character issues](#) himself.

Long Game Evangelicals hurt their cause when their objections to Donald Trump devolve into caustic criticism. At times, “Never Trumpers” can come across as smug and self-righteous. Their disdain for the president can eclipse their good judgment as they fall into the same verbal recklessness of the one they are criticizing. Scripture commands Christians to show [respect](#) even to Caesars like Nero. Insults, name-calling, bitterness, bragging, insinuations, personal attacks, unfounded allegations, unproven accusations, mockery, hit-pieces with anonymous sources, opposition research, slander, rumor, and gossip, are all the stuff of today’s political discourse, but the follower of Jesus Christ must maintain a higher standard by speaking only the [truth in love](#).

Consistently praying for the salvation of Donald Trump would probably help soften these evangelical hearts toward him. Donald Trump is not a Christian by Biblical standards. Like his predecessor, [Barak Obama](#), Donald Trump has expressed religious belief that represents a departure from historic Christian [doctrine](#). In the area of Christian ethics, Donald Trump does not bear the fruit that gives evidence that he is a regenerate follower of Jesus. He offers us no assurance that he has humbly bowed his knee to Christ the King. Sadly, thousands of evangelicals may not care much about his spiritual condition as long as they can use him for their political ends. For more reasons than one, Donald Trump needs our prayers.

3. Dangers for Centrist Evangelicals

The position of Centrist Evangelicals might be misconstrued as neutrality or apathy regarding some of the crucial issues facing our nation and the church. In turn, this might be regarded by some as cowardice. Centrist Evangelicals should accept the reality that they will be criticized from both sides. They will be constantly baited into political debates, pressured to “be bold,” and “take a stand,” and tempted to react to charges of cowardice from the right and left. Like Jesus, they will have to find wise ways to avoid being [baited](#) into divisive political debates.

Centrist Evangelicals must be mindful that centrism is not a virtue in itself. Some may try to hide under the cover of centrism in order to avoid taking a controversial public stand on an issue, pretending to be more noble than others and somehow above the fray as they critique those on their right and left.

John the Baptist wasn't making a political statement when he condemned King Herod's adulterous affair with and subsequent marriage to his [brother's wife](#), but that moral statement on Herod's character certainly carried political implications and it cost him his life. In John the Baptist's view, character matters.

Even if they are careful to make no public endorsements of particular candidates, or identify with a particular political party, Centrist Evangelicals who are faithful to preach and teach the Word and abide by its truth will not be able to avoid controversy and criticism in this political season.

4. Dangers for Last Chance Evangelicals

Last Chance Evangelicals may convey a sense of pessimistic outlook on the future of the church in America. Our hope, of course, is in Christ alone and not in any political leader. "It is better to take refuge in the Lord," writes the [Psalmist](#), "than to trust in princes." By declaring with certainty that a Biden administration will close churches and take away freedoms guaranteed to us by the Bill of Rights, they can stoke a spirit of fear that has been used by many American politicians in the [past](#). Since many Last Chance Evangelicals [opposed](#) Donald Trump in 2016, their endorsement of him now has the appearance of sacrificing principle for pragmatism. Furthermore, they may be tempted to bind the conscience of other evangelicals on an issue that is not directly addressed in Scripture, pronouncing with confidence that their [position](#) is the [only legitimate position](#) for evangelicals to take.

Importantly, Last Chance Evangelicals risk losing their credibility with many younger evangelicals, who are looking for strong and courageous moral leadership from their elders regarding these defining issues.

5. Dangers for Nationalist Evangelicals

The tendency of Nationalist Evangelicals to quickly deny every bad thing they hear about Donald Trump while believing every good thing they hear about him makes them particularly vulnerable to various forms of propaganda, including assertions found in popular [conspiracy theories](#) like [QAnon](#). The world notices the penchant of many evangelicals for these [conspiracy theories](#) and it has not improved the credibility of evangelicals as a whole. Without hesitation or nuance, many Nationalist Evangelicals have attached their evangelicalism (or what they understand evangelicalism to be) to Donald Trump's Republican Party. In the end, it plays into the stereotype that evangelicals are gullible, [uneducated](#), and easily misled.

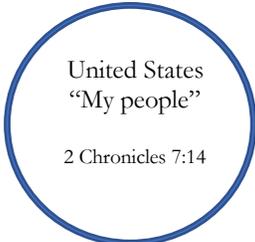
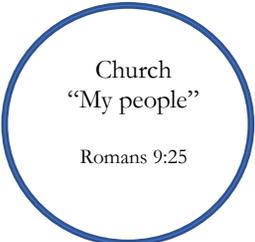
Evangelical leaders in this category have proximity to power and wield much influence over the evangelical world. These leaders, known by some of their critics as "[Court Evangelicals](#)," risk becoming tools in the hands of a manipulative (and manipulatable) politician. Showering Donald Trump with [gushing flattery](#) at every turn, they believe that in him they have found their "[dream president](#)." Most of them seem to cherish their role so much that some are willing to partner with and endorse [proponents of false doctrine](#) in order to retain access to the President's ear. But when they start to look and sound like Donald Trump, it appears that [he is influencing them](#) more than they are influencing him.

Christian Nationalism views the United States as a Christian Nation, believing that God has always been on our side, and that our peace and prosperity depends on us returning to him. This return means going back to the ideals of our nation's founding when God made a supposed covenant with our with America. Christian Nationalist churches, sometimes referred to as "God and Country Churches" are known for blending national songs and patriotic symbols into public worship. Preaching about Jesus is mixed in with praise for the military, God Bless America (though it is [not a Christian song](#)), the American flag, and the Pledge of Allegiance. They encourage fellow Christians to

vote for Christian candidates who will establish Christian laws to create a Christian culture that make it easier for Christians to follow Christ without much cost. Consequently, they are especially vulnerable to the politician who skillfully uses Christian language and symbols [to win their votes](#).

If [Christian Nationalism](#) had a theme verse, it would be [2 Chronicles 7:14](#). But a closer look at this popular verse reveals a different story than the one offered by Nationalist Evangelicals. In the Old Testament, God worked through the nation of Israel to bless the nations of the earth with the Scripture and the Savior, the Word of God written and the Word of God made flesh. Israel was God’s covenant people whom he created, elected, and called. With the entry of Jesus into human history, a new era begins as Christ clarified that his kingdom was [not of this world](#). His kingdom would continue to advance through his elect people, the church. His church would have no geographical, racial, or cultural borders but would be universal and global, strategically distributed among the nations of the earth. Because our citizenship is in heaven, local churches are embassies for the King of Kings. Therefore, Christianity is not national, but global. This crucial distinction between Israel and the church is often lost on America-centric Nationalist Evangelicals.

To be sure, there are some similarities. As the Old Testament nation of Israel was surrounded by hostile foes on the outside and threatened by infiltrating idolatry on the inside, so the church today finds itself dispersed among the nations of the earth, surrounded by a hostile culture and infiltrated by idolatry. For this reason, Peter applies the Old Testament description of Israel to the New Testament church when he says that followers of Jesus are [“sojourners and exiles.”](#) However, the material blessings promised to Israel do not apply in this age of the church, and the spiritual blessings promised to Israel belong only to the church, not the United States. Failing to make this important distinction between Old Testament Israel and the United States, represents a misinterpretation and [misappropriation](#) of God’s Word that is typical in Christian Nationalism.

Old Testament	Christian Nationalism	New Testament
<p style="text-align: center;">Nations</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p style="text-align: center;">Israel “My people” 2 Chronicles 7:14</p> </div>	<p style="text-align: center;">Nations</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p style="text-align: center;">United States “My people” 2 Chronicles 7:14</p> </div>	<p style="text-align: center;">Nations</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p style="text-align: center;">Church “My people” Romans 9:25</p> </div>

Like Justice Evangelicals, Nationalist Evangelicals often remain in an information silo that confirms their biases and moves them farther away from a Biblical worldview. They can be influenced and disciplined more by politically conservative commentators like Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, and Rush Limbaugh than by evangelical pastors, scholars, and historians (unless the evangelical pastor, scholar, or historian agrees with Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, and Rush Limbaugh). They commonly conflate Biblical truth with patriotic themes and revise American history in a way that [overestimates](#) our [Founders’ devotion](#) to Christ and downplays our past national sins in a way that demonstrates a [naive understanding](#) of American history.

Consequently, Nationalist Evangelicals, in their displays of fierce loyalty to Donald Trump in political rallies, family dinners, sermons, Sunday School classes, and social media, can give the impression that they love their country as much or more than Christ, the Constitution more than the Bible, the National Anthem more than Amazing Grace, the flag more than the cross. But in applying a [double standard](#) that favors Donald Trump, they risk losing the credibility that is necessary to publicly proclaim the gospel and reach all nations for Christ. As a rule, our worship services should contain no elements that would make any fellow believer from any nation of the world feel excluded if he or she were to visit that Sunday morning.

Sadly, [Christian Nationalism](#) is commonly associated with [White Nationalism](#). The emphasis on returning to our national roots, can miscommunicate a longing for a return to white supremacy and racial segregation. Consequently, African-American churches are not as prone to commit the error of Christian Nationalism. They are much less likely to celebrate “God and Country” Sundays or incorporate patriotic music in their worship services, and historically they have sung much more of their [citizenship in heaven](#). Nationalist Evangelicals may not intend to send racist signals, but they should be aware that the very nature of Christian Nationalism [tends to attract](#) people who hold to White Nationalism.

Nationalist Evangelicals often fall into the moral pragmatism that evangelicals have long condemned in which the ends [justifies](#) the means. It is common to find them on social media mimicking Donald Trump’s combative style, personal attacks, and logical fallacies. By their unwavering support and effusive praise of Donald Trump, they likely contribute to the negative way that the non-evangelical world [views evangelicals](#), so that “in popular usage, the word evangelical is nearly synonymous with “[hypocrite](#).” The question is this: Will the advantages of the Trump administration be worth the [compromises](#) many evangelicals have been willing to make to get them?

And finally, the older the evangelical, the more likely he or she is a Nationalist Evangelical. When their political views are at odds with the teaching of Christ and the apostles, they are less effective in passing on the faith to the next generation

Conclusion: What Should We Then Do?

1. Pray for mercy

America is exceptional in its goodness, being an instrument of God to restrain evil around the world and safely harbor countless immigrants and refugees. America does indeed offer unparalleled opportunity to those who are willing to work. If not here, where would one go to find more religious and economic freedom and opportunity?

But America is also exceptional in its wickedness. Jesus [taught](#) that to whom much is given, much is required. We have been given much in terms of Biblical knowledge, peace, and prosperity. And yet Americans, including evangelicals, are uniquely proud, boastful, ungrateful, and discontent. The church in America has enjoyed unprecedented freedom and uncommon protection from our government and the United States remains one of the easiest places on the planet to follow Christ. Yet, our own prosperity has become the means by which we neglect his priorities. We have dismissed our sins and boasted in our success, and for these things, we will be held accountable.

God does indeed judge nations. If he did not spare Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, he will certainly not spare us. But before we can expect our nation to turn to God in humility and

repentance, we, the church, must lead the way by our example. And we will only do that by God's mercy and grace.

2. Consume Scripture

A steady diet of God's Word, skillfully interpreted and applied, has a purifying effect on the believer's life. Understanding the Bible is not an easy task, but requires hard intellectual sweat. As one of my seminary professors, Howard Hendricks, said, "The Bible will not yield its fruit to the lazy." But interpreting the Bible is only the beginning. The purpose of studying Scripture is to make us more like Christ. We are to be [doers](#) of the word and not hearers only. And in the word, we are guided on how to think about the cultural issues of the day and also how to communicate with other people about them. We are to lovingly [speak](#) the truth, being quick to [listen](#), slow to speak, and slow to anger, as we honestly consider the best evidence on [both sides](#) of an issue. At all times, we must treat our political opponents with [gentleness and respect](#) in our communication and, as [Matt Whitman](#) has said, we should show some "political grace." If we would consistently do these things in our political discourse, we would be more effective representatives of our King.

Unfortunately, evangelicals are not spending much time in the Bible they say they love. We are constantly consuming cable news, talk radio, and social media, but not much of God's Word. Consequently, we are not able to discern how our favorite politician or pundit misquotes or misinterprets Scripture. One recent [survey](#) revealed that 66% of evangelicals say they use Facebook every day, but 32% say they are reading the Bible every day. Whether all evangelicals are answering these polling questions about their Bible-reading habits truthfully, God only knows. But low consumption of Biblical truth might explain a lot of theological confusion and political division among today's evangelicals.

3. Read widely and deeply before speaking loudly.

Evangelicals who want to join the national political discourse on various platforms have a responsibility to educate themselves on multiple issues. We are all prone to confirmation bias, interpreting new evidence as confirmation for the views we already hold, while avoiding and suppressing all evidence to the contrary. But today's issues are often complex and multi-faceted and cannot be addressed with simplistic solutions and pithy soundbites. Furthermore, as [Destin Sandlin](#) has observed, America has enemies on the internet who want to [manipulate and divide](#) us over the very issues we have been discussing.

There is wisdom in exerting the intellectual effort necessary to read and listen to people who disagree with us, trying to understand their point of view. It is just good manners to fully understand someone before we publicly disagree with them. In this we obey the [Golden Rule](#) of doing to others as we would have them to us. We don't want anyone misrepresenting our position or misquoting our words to make [straw men](#) they can easily take down. We shouldn't do that to others either.

4. Persuade with honor.

During the 2016 Republican primary, Jeb Bush [told](#) Donald Trump, "You're not going to be able to insult your way to the presidency." Donald Trump's response was to insult Jeb Bush and then proceed to win the presidency. Through name-calling and insults directed at his political rivals (both Republican and Democrat), Trump galvanized his base. Insults are the tool of the intellectually lazy, a

form of the [ad hominem fallacy](#) which does not require knowledge, understanding, or analysis. Donald Trump is particularly good at it, but he is not alone.

Donald Trump's opponents often use the same strategy against him as our national public discourse becomes less civil and more juvenile. Sadly, it is not uncommon now to see social media posts and tweets by people who identify themselves as "Christians," "Christ-followers," or "a disciple of Jesus" online, who then proceed to do the very things on social media that Jesus told them not to do. Insulting another human being, made in the image of God, is in God's eyes, tantamount to [murder](#).

Besides being an offense to God, it is also ineffective in terms of persuading people. If we want to fire up our base, we may insult people who are not in our political tribe. But if we want to persuade others to join our political tribe (for example, if we want them to move from the pro-choice to the pro-life position) insulting them won't get the job done. How many people have changed their political positions because someone in the other party called them an idiot (or worse)? The typical effect of an insult is that it causes people to dig in and cling to their beliefs even tighter.

There is a caveat here. Refraining from personal attacks and insults does not mean that we can never say anything negative about anyone or publicly disagree with them. The guardrails of Scripture are truth and love. First, we ask, "Is this true?" If not, we should not say it. Second, we ask, "Is this loving?" That is, "Is this in the best interest of those I am talking to as well as the person I am talking about?" Sometimes people need to hear hard truth even about themselves or those they admire and it is loving to speak it to them. Throughout Scripture, Jesus and his apostles warned their hearers about the errant teaching and examples of other people, at times even [naming names](#). Even so, we must speak only the truth and practice Christian tolerance: loving the people we disagree with.

5. Respect the freedom of conscience that preserves unity.

In each local church in America, church members will hold multiple and conflicting political opinions. Of course, we all hold to the positions we hold because we think they are right and true. We wouldn't hold to them otherwise. But there will be other believers who are just as smart and godly as you who will disagree with you. That should give you pause. If the Bible specifically told us who to vote for in 2020, that's another story. But how or whether to vote is largely in the realm of individual conscience.

Gavin Ortlund has written a helpful [book](#) in which he argues for theological triage. There are issues that come up in every church that should be analyzed and categorized so that we know "which hills to die on."

First-Rank Doctrines are *essential* to proclaim and defend the gospel. For example, doctrines such as justification by faith alone and the deity of Christ must be defended at all costs and professing Christians must be unified on these to have fellowship and partnership with one another.

Second-Rank Doctrines are *urgent* for the health and practice of the church and will divide Christians who love each other into different churches and denominations. For example, questions about who is baptized and how (sprinkling or immersion) would fall into this category. However, even though they disagree on these urgent matters, these churches can still work together for the advance of the gospel.

Third-Rank Doctrines, like the age of the earth and the order of events prior to the return of Christ, are *important*, but not important enough to separate or divide Christians.

Fourth-Rank Doctrines, are *unimportant* to our witness to the gospel. Examples would be what musical instruments, if any, are to be used in public worship. In Ortlund’s words, “Fourth-rank issues might be practically relevant or intellectually stimulating, but they are not theologically important.”

Normally, I would rank a presidential election as either important or unimportant. I do not see voting as a first or second rank issue, unless politicians, political parties, and preachers are appealing to Scripture to bolster ideas that are contrary to sound doctrine. There is room for disagreement in our church for various views along the political spectrum, but it is important that each member of our church approach political discussions with humility, respect, and teachability.

It is always the right thing to be gracious in our speech and kind to one another, even in our disagreements.

6. Vote according to your Biblically-informed conscience.

As I have said many times before, if you are looking for a church where the pastor tells you how to vote, I’m sure you can find one. But that is not my practice and it never has been. I am not the spokesman for, nor am I beholden to, any political party. If God’s Word commanded me to tell you how to vote in a constitutional republic, I would do it without hesitation. But my job is to [equip](#) every believer in our church family with sound doctrine and wise application so each one can make Biblically informed decisions for themselves on matters of conscience.

I will continue to address racial injustice, religious liberty, the role of government, the vocation of marriage, the sanctity of human life, the right to private property, the duty of government officials, our responsibility to the poor, and a host of other culturally relevant and controversial issues that the Bible addresses. I will also continue to publicly evaluate the character and messages of celebrities in our culture who claim to be Christian, use the Bible to teach things that are not true, and manipulate the people of God. It matters not whether the celebrities make their living in Hollywood, Nashville, New York, or Washington.

But I have also stated repeatedly that if you ask me—as a friend, a fellow citizen, and a patriot—how I plan to vote, I’ll be glad to tell you and I’ll explain the thinking behind my decision. I think about it a lot. I have nothing to hide. I love a good discussion and I revel in a good and civil debate. I’ll even buy the coffee.

7. Prioritize the mission of the church.

Patriotism in its rightful place is an act of love. To love our neighbors certainly means we love our country. Yet, without vigilance, love of country can gradually displace our love for God. Presidents and political parties can become idols that we worship and celebrate and trust for provision and protection. In truth, the best way to love our country is to love Jesus more. And from all I know about our nation’s founders, most of them would agree. Neither presidents nor parties can be fully trusted and they make terrible gods.

Jesus did not say, “Go therefore and make America great again.” Neither did he say, “Go therefore and make disciples of Americans.” He [said](#), “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” The only hope for the world is Jesus. Regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religious belief, sexual orientation, or political persuasion, he is the only hope for present and eternal joy. If we have become more zealous and passionate about our political party than the world-wide advance of the gospel; if we have become more committed to restoring the United States to someone’s naïve notion of its former glory than to promoting the glory of God in all the earth; if we are more concerned about telling people how to vote than telling people how to know Christ; if we are willing to sell out our integrity and destroy our credibility with unbelievers in order to get our candidate elected, something has gone terribly, tragically wrong.

Jesus promised he would build his church. He didn’t merely hope or plan to build it. He said he would build it. It is an absolute certainty. For two thousand years the church has endured enemies from within and without, but God’s plan was not thwarted. The church was here long before the United States was founded as a nation, and the church will be here long after the United States goes the way of all nations. When Christ’s kingdom finally and fully comes to earth, the White House and the Capitol Building will be gone, but the church of the living God will be alive and well.