

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
February 13, 2016

Is Politics the Answer to the Human Condition?

The presidential primary season has begun, but, unlike recent elections, we have two extreme candidates—Bernie Sanders on the leftwing of the Democratic Party and Donald Trump, who fits no label. Since he began his run for the Republican nomination, Trump’s positions on key issues have changed radically. It continues to baffle me personally why people find him appealing. As for evangelical Christians, I find it troublesome that he is taken seriously, for his lifestyle, his values, his demeanor and his language bear no resemblance whatsoever to biblical values, virtues, morals or ethical standards. But that is not the point of this edition of *Issues*, which probes the role politics plays in solving the problems of the human condition. Consider these thoughts:

- First, each election cycle, I am struck with how the respective candidates present the condition of the US. The message of Bernie Sanders is somber, grim and dark. Sanders pictures America as a place of broad suffering: He gives focus to student debt, families in which mom and dad both work, strained marriages, and insufficient child care. Why such dire descriptions of America? Such suffering is the fault of the billionaire class. He speaks of the economy being “rigged” and the near fraudulent way unemployment statistics are reported. To him, unemployment is at least double what the Labor Department reports and “youth unemployment is off the charts.” Columnist Peggy Noonan aptly captures Sanders’s worldview: “It’s all stark—good guys and bad guys, angels and devils. But it’s also clear and easy to understand: We are in terrible trouble because our entire system is rigged, the billionaires did it, they are the beneficiaries of the biggest income transfer from the poor to the rich in the history of man, and we are going to stop it. How? Through a ‘political revolution.’” This “revolution” begins with the voting booth, where the political culture will shift leftward. However, as columnist Joe Klein warns, “the Democrats should worry about their attachment to big government, which, in America, has come to mean more unaccountable bureaucracy, like the Department of Veterans Affairs; more inefficiency, like the weird tangle of federal job-training programs, each more irrelevant than the last; and more perverse incentives, like welfare programs that ask for nothing—no personal responsibility—in return from their recipients. Big government is the way I was treated at the post office this afternoon.” The “progressive Democrat” label that Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Debbie Wasserman Schultz (head of the Party) all embrace is simply another name for the European-style social democrat who, once in power, redistributes wealth and, as a socialist, seeks to control some means of production (e.g., the health care system). For the “progressive Democrat,” a strong, powerful, centralized state is the answer to the human condition. Trust the state and a new era will dawn.

- Second, think with me about the message of Donald Trump. His populism and attempt to identify with middle class anxiety and anger has produced results, at least some of the poll numbers indicate so. But columnist Michael Gerson persuasively argues that Trump is the final “triumph of Clintonism—Bill Clintonism—which is the belief that personal character, particularly on sexual and family matters, has no serious public implications.” But there is also something far more dangerous here—pride. Gerson again: “Pride is his platform.” He says he “is smarter and tougher than our corrupt and stupid leaders.” It is important for evangelical Christians to remember C.S. Lewis’s counsel: “The essential vice, the utmost evil is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison; it was through Pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind.” Here, then, is the fundamental danger of Donald Trump: “A narcissistic leader is always at enmity with other people and groups, and cannot be a unifying figure. As Abraham Lincoln displayed, the capacity to heal requires humility and empathy. A narcissistic leader is vindictive, keeps lists of his grievances and enemies and is vulnerable to the abuse of power.” Is Donald Trump really the answer the problems of the human condition?
- Third, increasing involvement in politics and government has grave dangers for the Christian. For the maximum impact for righteousness in government, a proper, balanced perspective is needed. This necessitates ridding ourselves of what Chuck Colson called a “starry-eyed view of political power.” Some Christians think that by marshaling a Christian voting bloc we can establish Christ’s kingdom on earth. We dare not confuse the external and limited good that political power can achieve with the internal and infinite good that God’s grace produces. Further, we cannot buy what Colson calls the “political illusion,” the notion that all human problems can be solved by political institutions. It is idolatrous to believe that, for the Bible declares that the root problem of society is spiritual. What the Christian seeks through government is justice, not power. Our goal is, therefore, to move the culture towards the righteousness of God’s revelation. The job of total spiritual transformation is the role of the church, not the state.
- Finally, how then does the Christian decide what to support and what to reject in politics? How does one decide whom to support in elections? For what kinds of laws should the believer work and fight? Here are five major principles to guide the Christian in assessing potential candidates and laws:

 1. The pre-eminence of religious liberty. Any candidate or legislation that restricts the practice of religious faith should be resisted.
 2. The protection of life as sacred. Candidates or legislation that treat life frivolously or that seek to destroy it (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, infanticide) should be resisted and defeated.
 3. Provision of justice for all. Candidates and legislation must reflect God’s concern for

justice and equity. Reading the biblical book of Amos is convincing evidence that God desires that government promote laws that protect the poor and disadvantaged from exploitation and oppression.

4. Preservation of the traditional family. One of the clear teachings of the Bible is that the family is a critical institution to God. Legislation that negatively impacts the family should be rejected. For example, tax legislation that promotes single parent families or penalizes a father for living with his family is counterproductive. The promotion of same-sex marriage runs counter to God's revelation.

5. The promotion of Judeo-Christian values in education and legislation. For example, values of honesty, integrity, personal responsibility, accountability can be easily undermined by a leader who wantonly lies and shows disrespect for the law. Fraud, bribery and corruption undermine public trust and confidence and are terribly destructive. Education must reinforce the values of parents and not undermine their authority (see Deuteronomy 6:1-10).

Christians, then, as salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16), should seek to effect righteous change in the culture through the political process, but always remembering that the fundamental problem of the human condition is not political, economic or social—it is spiritual. Only Jesus Christ can completely transform a person and thereby a culture.

See Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (25 January 2016); Joe Klein in *Time* (1 February 2016), p. 30; Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (30-31 January 2016); and James P. Eckman, *Christian Ethics*, pp. 67-74.