

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
May 14, 2016

### ***Donald Trump and America's Evangelical Christians***

The term evangelical used to be a meaningful term. It normally meant someone who holds that the Bible is the final source of authority; that the Gospel transforms lives; that personal piety is an important quality of life; and that the values, virtues and ethical standards found in Scripture reflect the character of God. But, in 2016, the term “evangelical” carries little substantive meaning. Generally speaking, today’s “evangelical” seems to worship the “moralistic, therapeutic, deistic” god that sociologist Christian Smith has identified in his research. And several American evangelical leaders are embracing a raw, pragmatic ethic in their presidential endorsements. For example, Joel Osteen has called Donald Trump “a friend of this ministry” and “a good man.” Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr. has hailed Trump as “one of the greatest visionaries of our time” and a wonderful Christian brother “who reminds me of my dad.” Pat Robertson said of Trump in an interview, “You inspire us all.” Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Dallas, who has introduced Trump at rallies, says, “We need a strong leader and a problem-solver, hence many Christians are open to a more secular candidate.” As a Christian leader, I find these statements and endorsements of Donald Trump absolutely astonishing!

The raw pragmatism of such endorsements betrays further evidence of the shallowness and superficial nature of evangelical Christianity in North America. Christian columnist Andree Seu Peterson summarizes the visceral pragmatic thinking of many American evangelicals:

- At least he doesn't act like a politician.
- At least you know where you stand with him.
- At least he tells the truth.
- At least he doesn't pretend to be a Christian.
- He is one who will fix our problems.
- We can't stand around and watch Hillary or Bernie win.
- We are choosing a president, not a pastor.

In addition to such nonsensical pragmatism, how can evangelical Christian leaders endorse and gush over Donald Trump when he declares that he has never asked God for forgiveness because he does not really do anything that would require forgiveness? For evangelical leaders who endorse Trump, “godly leadership” is apparently that which celebrates narcissism, greed, and deceitfulness in the pursuit of power. They apparently embrace Trump’s “strong leadership” and his ability to “get things done” at the total expense of integrity, righteousness, servanthood and humility. For example, these are the terms and phrases Donald Trump uses to describe himself and his own character: “I was a great student. I was good at everything. . . I will be a

great president. . . I win at golf. . . I have a great, great company. . . . I rely on myself. . . . Nobody can build like I can build. Nobody.” On his personal admission of adultery, Trump said, “Beautiful, famous, successful, married—I’ve had them all, secretly, the world’s biggest names.”

San Antonio pastor Max Lucado has not been taken in by the pragmatic surrealism of some evangelical leaders. Lucado reflects on his role as a dad and his right to interview the various dates of his three daughters as they were growing up. Lucado concluded long ago that the most important character trait he was looking for in these prospective dates was “decency.” “Would he treat my daughter with kindness and respect? Could he be trusted to bring her home on time? In his language, actions and decisions, would he be a decent guy?” As a culture and as Christians, Lucado contends, we appreciate decency. We applaud decency. We teach decency. We seek to develop decency. He concludes: “The leading Republican candidate to be the next leader of the free world would not pass my decency interview. I’d send him away. I’d tell my daughter to stay home. . . I’ve been chagrined at his antics. He ridiculed a war hero. He made mockery of a reporter’s menstrual cycle. He made fun of a disabled reporter. He referred to a former first lady, Barbara Bush, as ‘mommy’ and belittled Jeb Bush for bringing her on the campaign trail. He routinely calls people ‘stupid’ and ‘dummy.’ One writer catalogued 64 occasions that he called someone ‘loser’ . . . Such insensitiveness wouldn’t be acceptable even for a middle school student body election. But for the Oval Office? And to do so while brandishing a Bible and boasting of his Christian faith?” He continues, “If a public personality calls on Christ one day and calls someone a ‘bimbo’ the next, is something not awry? And to do so, not once, but repeatedly, unrepentantly and unapologetically? We stand against bullying in schools. Shouldn’t we do the same in presidential politics?” One supporter of Trump declared that “we are voting with our middle finger.” Such comments reflect the anger and pent-up frustration of the American public. But this is the language of a “gang-fight” not a presidential election. As Lucado laments, “Anger-fueled reactions have caused trouble ever since Cain was angry at Abel.”

The democratic-republic of the United States is in trouble. The fear, despair and dissatisfaction of Americans have drawn them to candidates (e.g., Trump and Sanders) who are promising radical change and the restoration of America’s greatness. But as *Christianity Today* editor Andy Crouch argues, “Great leaders do not just promise strength; they call people to risk as well. But around the world today we see the rise of leaders who offer various forms of authority without vulnerability—strength without risk. This is the promise of every authoritarian government and every dictator, and it is increasingly the currency of American political campaigns . . . They promise goods without a price, protection without effort, and benefits without costs—at least to people like us. They depend on extracting the effort and cost from others—others who are treated not as potential partners but as permanent enemies.” In an obvious reference to Trump, Crouch writes of “proclaiming one’s own power and reveling in others’ weakness. The unrealistic promises have been matched by crude displays of bravado and disdain for ‘losers’.” In contrast to Trump, I am reminded of Abraham Lincoln, arguably our greatest president, who refused to demonize his opponents during the horrific Civil War. In his Second Inaugural Address he declared, “with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right.”

With the Democratic Party in Bernie Sanders, we see a populist flirtation with Democratic Socialism. In Donald Trump we see the abandonment of a commitment to limited government upheld by “the health of society’s primary institutions such a marriage, family, and community.” As theologian Albert Mohler observes, “The Framers of the American Republic agreed that it would be impossible to have a representative democracy and a limited government if the people did not elect leaders who embodied the virtues of the citizenry while respecting and protecting society’s pre-political institutions: marriage and family, the church and the local community. Thus, the idea of a limited government requires that society uphold and pursue the health of its most basic institutions. When a civil society is weak, government becomes strong. When the family breaks down, government grows stronger. When the essential institutions of society are no longer respected, government demands that respect for itself. That is a recipe for tyranny.”

In November, we as genuine, biblically-based Christians face an excruciating dilemma: Hillary Clinton as the likely Democratic candidate and Donald Trump as the Republican candidate. As I am writing this, I know that I cannot in good conscience vote for either one of these candidates. But, as a stewardship responsibility before God, I believe I should vote. I do know that I will not vote for Donald Trump as president, and, because her political convictions and policies run counter to everything I hold dear, I will not vote for Hillary Clinton. In our democracy, we have the right to write in a candidate or perhaps there will be a viable third-party candidate as Senator Ben Sasse is advocating. I believe that the American Republic is facing one of its greatest challenges in its long history. We are a nation under God’s judgment and we must turn to Him in dependence and in selfless prayer. Perhaps in His mercy, God will send us a leader who will truly serve the Republic’s citizens and lead them with humility, fortitude and faithfulness. We should all be praying to that end.

See Michael Horton, “The Theology of Donald Trump” in [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (16 March 2016); Andree Seu Peterson in *World* (30 April 2016), p. 63; Marvin Olasky in *World* (19 March 2016), p. 68; Max Lucado in [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (26 February 2016); Andy Crouch in *Christianity Today* (May 2016), p. 24; Albert Mohler in [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (5 May 2016).