

## Our Stake in Political Elections

~ Jeremiah 29:4-7 ~

Body and board surfers growing up in Southern California are frustrated by what we may call a “false wave” phenomenon. The water always is cold, patience is a necessary virtue while waiting for the perfect wave. When looking out to sea for the next “big one,” a shivering surfer can be fooled by a swell that never materializes. It looks like an incoming and highly desirable (and rideable) wave. Yet the *false* wave simply rolls through and disappears, disappointing the increasingly numb would-be surfers.

At this point in time I see what appears to be a huge cultural tidal wave about to crash upon us. It appears to be an irresistible social and moral tsunami that will swamp the church of Christ. Its anti-Christian trajectory is unmistakable. Its momentum seems irresistible. I am not sure if this is a false wave, a last gasp of a dying godless secularism, or if it is a true tsunami that will devastate Christian individuals, families, and churches. The tidal wave is:

- \* hostile to religion, especially Christianity
- \* denies moral absolutes
- \* denies the existence or knowability of truth
- \* obscures the differences between men and women
- \* normalizes homosexuality
- \* sanctions transgenderism
- \* controls the major national institutions: the media, the universities, the public schools, Silicon Valley, Hollywood and the arts, the nonprofits, and the administrative state
- \* characterizes American history as a dark history of oppression rather than one of ever-expanding freedom

- \* contemplates overthrowing long-standing constitutional norms in order to ensure its hold on power

### **Christians and politics**

Ordinarily we avoid political commentary. We are loathe to create the impression that in order to find a happy home at our or any evangelical church, one has to be of a particular political persuasion. However, our avoidance of politics may have unintended consequence. We may be creating the false impression that we are indifferent to political issues. Or just as problematic, it may be concluded that Christianity has nothing to say about these issues. Truth is, Christianity has much to say and we Christians have a stake in the well-being of the nation to which we belong. Inevitably the well-being of the nation is tied to how it resolves basic political questions, touching both foreign and domestic policy. Jeremiah's direction to the Hebrew exiles is pertinent for us:

*Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:7)*

Jeremiah's instruction is for the exiles to carry on their regular cultural activity: build houses, plant gardens, take jobs, marry, and raise families (Jer 29:5, 6). Yet he ties their well-being to Babylon's well-being. Granted, believers together constitute their own "holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9). As such we, like the Hebrew exiles, are "strangers and exiles" in our own land (Heb 11:13; 1 Peter 1:1, 17; 2:11). Our earthly "welfare," like theirs, is tied to our country's welfare. The Apostle Paul implies much the same in urging that

*<sup>1</sup>supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, <sup>2</sup>for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. (1 Tim 2:1, 2)*

Our enjoyment of a “peaceful and quiet life,” lived in a “godly and dignified,” way is tied by the Apostle to the favor of kings and others in civil authority over us for whom we are to pray (1 Tim 2:1, 2). We pray for them “*that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life.*” What the civil authorities do or fail to do has a direct bearing on whether or not social conditions will be conducive of “a peaceful and quiet life.” It matters to us what the disposition of the government is towards us.

Back in the 1700’s in France, a group of businessmen met with an agent of the royal government who asked, “What can we do for you?” They answered famously, “*laissez nous faire,*” now reduced to *laissez faire*: “Leave us alone!” That is all that they wanted. Just leave us alone. Don’t interfere with our right freely to exchange goods and services. This also is our answer. What do we want from the civil government? We want to be left alone. Leave us alone to govern our own affairs. Leave us alone to carry out our mission without interference. Leave us alone to live according to our convictions at home, in the work place, and in the public square.

Christians have been at times naïve about which political principles are most likely to “leave us alone,” most likely to ensure our essential rights and liberties, and most likely to protect us from oppression and persecution. All political philosophies are not created equally. All political systems are not equally advantageous to us. Some are better than others at guaranteeing our freedom to fulfill our divinely-given mission. We must be politically discerning. We cannot allow ourselves to be swept along by what the popular media have to

say, or what celebrities are saying, or what professional athletes are saying, or what so-called experts are saying. We have a distinctive frame of reference. We have a distinctive agenda. We must evaluate the political scene according to that agenda. Consequently, when we exercise our political franchise, which as stewards of political power we are obligated to do, we must evaluate the candidates according to basic and fundamental Christian principles.

Let me advise that we ask of the various candidates the following questions. We ask them understanding that in our system we have two major parties and so for each office we choose between two candidates. All candidates are flawed, some more than others. We can write in a third-party candidate, but understand, while doing so may satisfy our conscience, it is essentially to throw away our vote. Our system is binary. It is not enough to say candidate “x” is terrible. One must also say that candidate “y” is less terrible and so worthy of our vote. Why do we sometimes vote for terrible candidates? Because in our view the other candidate is more terrible. This is not a new development. Since I first cast a ballot in 1976 and each time thereafter, cynics have assured us that we were choosing between the lesser of two evils. Jesus teaches us, “The one who is not against you is for you” (Lk 9:50). Often this must guide our electoral choices. Some candidates clearly are against us. Others are more willing to defend us or simply leave us alone. We find ourselves at times voting for bad persons who nevertheless are better than the alternative.

### **Basic rights**

Our first question is, do my candidates understand that basic human rights are God-given and not government-granted? Our basic rights, of life, liberty, and property, are “endowed by our Creator.” They are “unalienable rights,” God-given rights, natural rights. Our life, liberty, and property are ours, and no one has the right to deprive us of them. We can be

grateful that our founding documents recognize that God, not governments, gives to each person these rights. As for governments, the Declaration of Independence declares that they are “instituted among men” in order “to *secure* these rights.” The government does not grant us the right to speak and publish. We are born with these rights. We lose them only through usurpation and oppression. Governments simply are to recognize and protect our God-given and natural rights. Let us pursue the question of rights further.

### ***Life***

Do my candidates recognize the right-to-life from conception to natural death? More than a few candidates are in favor of aborting human life up to the day of birth, approving even partial-birth abortion. Will my candidates require that I violate my conscience by using my tax dollars to fund the destruction of unborn human life? Where do your candidates fall on related issues such as physician-assisted suicide? euthanasia? We wish to place in public office those who will support this most fundamental right to life. We are loathe to support any candidate who fails on this foundational issue.

### ***Religious liberty***

Do my candidates recognize the right of religious liberty? We must be grateful that we live in a country in which the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment is the law of the land. Our rights freely to *speak, publish, assemble, and petition* the government may not be abridged. Notice that the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment goes a step further and specifically protects religious liberty. One might have thought that a general affirmation of the right to speak, publish, assembly and petition would be enough, embracing as it does, all individuals and organizations. No, the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment goes a step further. It sets apart religious liberty and specifies that in particular the “free exercise” of religion may not be restricted by the government.

Do my candidates recognize the privileged status of religious liberty? Are my candidates likely to protect that liberty or compromise it in favor of the newly minted right to sexual freedom? Are my candidates likely to support the liberty of the Christian baker, the Christian photographer, the Christian florist to follow his or her convictions and not participate in a “wedding” that might violate their conscience? Will my candidates force Christian businessmen to provide insurance that pays for abortions? Will my candidates allow high school girls to refuse to undress, change clothes, and shower in bathrooms because there are boys there who claim to be girls? Do my candidates recognize that religious commitments affect the devout in their work, leisure, and community involvement and that these activities also must be protected? Or do they restrict religious liberty to what takes place within the walls of the church?

Are my candidates likely to guard the right of religious communities to preach and teach their doctrines and moral codes or are they likely to classify and even ban some such teaching as “hate speech?” Are my candidates likely to shut down churches during a pandemic while allowing liquor stores, marijuana dispensaries, and casinos to remain open, or will they recognize the exceptional rights of religious communities to govern their own affairs free from the interference of the government? The 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment rights, so cherished by people throughout the world, were hammered out in the English-speaking world on the anvil of religious liberty. It was English and Scottish dissenting Protestants, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists who fought, bled, and died in resistance to the British monarchy and who finally secured these and other essential rights. Religious liberty was both the catalyst and foundation upon which these other liberties were finally won.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? America's Great Debate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). The American Creed, which term he tracks to Gunnar Murdal's book *The American Dilemma*, consists of the essential

***Speech, publish, assemble, petition***

This leads us to ask ourselves further: do my candidates recognize these auxiliary rights to speak, publish, assemble, and petition? We are seeing an alarming assault on these fundamental rights these days. The German radical philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) laid the foundation for this assault by arguing that because some speech is oppressive and harmful to the oppressed, it should be banned. Free speech and the associated freedoms to publish, assemble, and petition increasingly are viewed as a tool of oppression, offering benefits primarily to the economically and racially privileged. Writing in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (1965), Marcuse introduced the concept of “repressive intolerance,” in which he argues that certain forms of speech must be *repressed*, that is, barred and silenced. Freedom of speech, he maintained, was serving the interests of oppression, therefore the repression of unwanted speech could serve the interests of true liberty.

This is the philosophical origin of campus speech codes and cancel culture, what may rightly be considered a new McCarthyism of the left. Speech may be labeled as violence (“speech is violence”) when it is used to support injustice, as may even be silence (“silence is violence”). It is argued that a truly tolerant and just society will *not tolerate* the voices of those supporting the current unjust and racist social structures. Of course, this is classic Orwellian doublespeak. A truly open, diverse, anti-racist, just and tolerant society must not tolerate the opinions of those who perpetrate the current (in their view) racist, unjust, and intolerant status quo. Justice for the oppressed requires intolerance of the oppressors: their ideals, their vision of society, their political views.

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dignity of every person, the equality of all, and certain inalienable rights, and “is the unique creation of a dissenting Protestant culture” (68).

It must be conceded that racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes and slurs have been used to harm disadvantaged groups. Opposition to this category of offensive speech is understandable. However, the list of what isn't to be tolerated has been broadened to include the philosophical, moral, political, and social viewpoints with which offended groups and individuals disagree. Herein lies the danger. Free speech is being squelched merely because a person or group is expressing ideas which another group deems harmful. A member of the United States Senate this week said in response to social media censorship of political thought, "There's no both sides when one side has chosen to reject truth." Her lack of self-awareness is startling. My side has the truth. Yours doesn't. Consequently, censoring you is not only permitted, but required.

This outlook in particular is being used to silence conservative voices, and even advocacy of free markets, self-reliance, hard work, limited government, textualist judicial philosophy, colorblind justice, the nuclear family, and "heteronormativity," etc. This way of thinking has given birth to terms such as *microaggressions*, and *hate-speech*, and developments such as *trigger warnings* and *safe spaces*, the latter being spaces where one will not hear ideas which one finds threatening. Scheduled campus speakers have been uninvited, journalists and faculty members have been shamed or fired, business executives have been forced to do public penance or resign because of expressing ideas considered to be harmful. Social media has censored and blocked opinions that are viewed as incorrect. We had to discuss what sermon title we would post on the internet this week in order to avoid the social media censors. Our colleague Neil Stewart entitled his election season sermon "Voting Between Two Kingdoms," and social media limited his ability to promote it.<sup>2</sup> These are ominous developments for the Christian community.

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<sup>2</sup> They prevented him from boosting it and then purged it from everywhere it had been posted or shared.

While no freedom is absolute (Oliver Wendell Holmes cited the example of shouting “fire” in a crowded theater), the Christian community has a vested interest in preserving these 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment liberties, especially in an environment in which our moral teaching is likely to be classified as hate speech, and in which the exclusivity of our doctrine (Jesus is the only way) is in violation of the canons of diversity and will be accused of making some people feel “unsafe.” This is not far-fetched, as examples can be found already in Canada and the United Kingdom. There is a widespread sense among those who oppose, or simply fail to support a progressive/liberal agenda that they must look around before they speak and whisper their opinions to their friends. Fear of radicalized Twitter mobs are commonplace, suppressing the free exchange of ideas, resulting in what more old-fashioned liberals once referred to as having a “chilling” effect on free expression. Do my candidates support the freedom rights of politically-incorrect groups, of churches, advocates of free markets, political conservatism, social and moral traditionalism to speak, publish, assemble, and petition?

### **Equality**

Do my candidates affirm the equality of all persons? Matters can become murky at this point, so it is important to define our terms and describe what we mean.

### ***Equal before God***

Christianity teaches that all human beings descend from a common father and mother. The races did not travel different evolutionary paths which originate with different original evolutionary parental sources. We all share the same common ancestors. There is no room for racism in a Christian understanding of the races given our common genetic heritage. Adam is

the father of us all. Eve is the mother of us all. We are all members of the same human family. We are all members of the same race, the human race. Moreover, our first parents were made in God's image, as the first chapter of Genesis explains:

*<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..."*

*<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image,*

*in the image of God he created him;*

*male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26a-27)*

Adam, Eve, and all their descendants share the divine image. We are born bearing that image. *All humanity is made in God's image.* All human life as a consequence is sacred. All human life shares an essential *dignity* and *sanctity*.<sup>3</sup> All human life is to be treated with *respect*.

Not only are we equal in creation, we are equal in redemption as well. We are all sinners by nature and sinners by practice. No one race is more evil than another. No one race may be singled out as particularly wicked. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).<sup>4</sup> Likewise, repeatedly we are told that God's love is for the world (Jn 3:16). Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it (Jn 3:17). Christ died for *all*, meaning for all kinds of persons, excluding no class of persons, no race, no ethnicity, no nation (Rom 3:22; 5:18; 6:10; 10:12; 11:32; 1 Cor 12:13; 15:22; 2 Cor 5:14; Gal 3:26; 1 Tim 2:6). Ethnic, class, and gender distinctions disappear at the foot of the cross. We are all equal before God:

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no*

*male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)*

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<sup>3</sup> The implications of this may be seen in the rationale for the punishment of murder (Gen 9:5, 6), and even in the prohibition of cursing, or verbally abusing another person (Jas 3:9, 10).

<sup>4</sup> This is not to argue that all *cultures* are equally evil. Some cultures are more brutal, more barbaric, more morally degraded, more violent, more oppressive than others. These are matters of culture, not race.

Christ is “the Savior of *all* people” (1 Tim 4:10). Christ brings “salvation for *all* people” (Titus 2:11). The Bible is not ambiguous about the essential unity and equality of all humanity across racial, ethnic, gender, class, and national lines. The Bible provides no basis for a superior/inferior status of one race over another.

### ***Equality in law***

Christians have not always been faithful in recognizing this essential equality of all people, or the implications of this essential equality in creation and redemption. We have not always treated people with the dignity and respect they deserve as image bearers. We have discriminated against those who are different. We have entertained bigoted ideas about others and acted prejudicially and unfairly. Our Christian forefathers tolerated and at times even advocated rigid class distinctions, slavery and segregation. Nevertheless, we understand today with greater clarity what the Bible teaches and what our national creed requires. We are grateful to live in a land whose foundational document features the opening line, “We hold these truth to be self-evident, that all men are created *equal*.” The Christian God is impartial. He requires that we be impartial.<sup>5</sup>

Do my candidates understand the equality of all persons, before God, and consequently under the law? Do they understand that lady justice must have a blindfold over her eyes? Do they understand that the law, the rules of society, must be applied without regard to one’s class or race or ethnicity or sex?

We ask because this historic understanding of equality is being challenged. “Identity politics” have grown in influence and popularity in recent years. This movement would have us

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<sup>5</sup> Deut 16:19; 2 Chron 19:17; Ps 82:2; Prov 24:23; 28:21; al 2:9; Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; 1 Tim 5:21; and esp. Jas 2:1, 9; 3:17.

classify our interests according to the group to which we belong: our race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, economic class, disability status, etc. It also would have us identify our interests and loyalties according to the groups(s) to which we belong.

“Critical race theory” divides the world into two groups: the oppressors and the oppressed. *Guilt* is assigned to all those who belong to majority culture that oppresses, regardless of their personal attitudes and actions; *victimhood* is assigned to all those who belong to minority groups (according to race, ethnicity, sex, sexual preference), for whom “social justice” is sought. Whites are said to be the beneficiaries of “white privilege,” all others victims of discrimination. The system is said to perpetuate “white supremacy,” and all those who support the status quo are complicit in the evil of racism, if for no other reason that the color of their skin.

“Intersectionality” is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw of Columbia University in her journal article “Mapping the Margins” (1991). She argued that we as individuals are the sum total of the groups to which we belong. Our “lived reality” can be described by referring to the intersection of those groups: our race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. The greater the number of marginalized groups to which we belong, the more weight our voice ought to carry in discussions of social justice.

What these three overlapping movements share is an essentially Marxist analysis of society, replacing class struggle with race and gender and other powerless minority groupings. All of society is divided into the malignant powerful and the virtuous oppressed. Thus dominant groups, because they are blinded by their social status, must “check their privilege,” that is, stop talking and listen to the voices of the oppressed. Men must quit “mansplaining” and recognize their “toxic masculinity.” Only the voices of the powerless reflect reality and can speak with moral authority. Even science must be silenced because it too often becomes a tool of

dominance, justifying differentials in outcome between the sexes and races. All such differences in outcome, it is assumed, in educational achievement, employment, health, diet, and housing are a result of injustice. Wherever outcomes are unequal, society is guilty of racism, sexism, classism, or some other 'ism. The social structures that perpetuate these inequalities must be unmasked and torn down.

Certainly there are racists. There will always be racists. Yet racism is not tolerated in American society. Anyone who can credibly be accused of racism, or proven to be racist, experiences universal social disapproval. One may have an affair, divorce, break up two families, remarry, have another affair, divorce, live with one's girlfriend, and pay no social consequence at all. Adulterers are given a free pass. But racism? The evils of racism are recognized and condemned by all. However, if one claims to see little evidence of racist or sexist attitudes or behavior, this is treated as a symptom of racism itself and considered naïve. A distinctive terminology is introduced to explain: racism and sexism today are implicit, not explicit; it is structural, institutional, systemic. Consequently, revolutionary change is the answer. There are open calls for dismantling the entire structure of American society, which will require discrimination against majority groups that have perpetrated the system of oppression. The radicals reject Martin Luther King's dream of a world in which his children would be judged "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." They demand preferences for and discrimination against classes of persons based on race and sex.<sup>6</sup> The speech of powerful groups must be controlled. Their unjust discourse must not be given air time. Their truth-claims are merely constructed narratives designed to dominate. Even violence is justified: the evidence

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<sup>6</sup> For example, of Ibram X. Kendi, whose most recent book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, calls for discrimination against those who have held power. "The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination" (cited in *National Review*, Christopher Caldwell, "The Prophet of Anti-Racism," Aug. 10, 2020), 26.

which can be seen in the streets of our major cities the last six months is a justification for an all-out assault on true equality and true justice.

These movements introduce a dangerous new tribalism from which the Civil Rights Act of 1964 attempted to deliver us. Racial, gender, and sexual orientation become defining characteristics by which I may know, and importantly, by which I may judge others, their opinions and the value of their voices. Do my candidates reject the neo-Jim Crow implications of those theories whereby individuals are to be classified and judged, given voice or silenced according to group identity?

Do my candidates understand that equality of *outcome* is not the same as equality in dignity and law? Do they recognize that we are not and cannot be equal in circumstances: our family life, education, neighborhoods, churches, opportunities, and obstacles are all different and will result in different outcomes; our abilities, whether mental, physical, relational, vocational are all different and will produce different and unequal results. It is inevitable that some will excel others in the classroom, on the basketball court, in the business world, in the courtroom, in the professions, and so on. Outcomes cannot be equalized except by treating people unequally, by favoring one group while suppressing another.

Do my candidates recognize this vital difference between equality before God and the law and equality of outcome? Do my candidates entertain redistributionist fantasies of seizing wealth from one group and placing it in the hands of another? Do my candidates advocate engineering diversity by determining college admissions, job opportunities, housing and health provisions, political appointments, and judicial nominations according to group identity?

This is a very dangerous game being played by some. It took 200 years for the American Republic to outlaw treating people according to their group (racial, ethnic, sexual). Christians

cannot but find ominous the reintroduction of this form of discrimination in the name of diversity.

We have to ask these questions because of the danger posed by those inspired by utopian visions of material equality. By some estimates, 100 million people have been murdered by socialist and communist regimes' pursuit of equality of outcome, that is, material equality. The most oppressive nations in the history of the world, the most murderous regimes in recorded history have justified liquidating the aristocracy, the rich, the middle class, the kulaks (prosperous peasants), dissidents, religionists, and countless others in the name of equality. This is why we say that it is ominous that so-called "identity politics" and "critical race theory" and "intersectionality" have grown in popularity in recent years.

Do my candidates recognize that justice can never be "social" but must always be individual? Laws may need to be changed, barriers may need to be eliminated, opportunities may need to be created so that, in the end, *individuals as individuals*, not as members of a group, may be treated justly and fairly. In a just world, I am not judged because of the group to which I belong, but as an individual. Do my candidates recognize that not only do black lives matter, that *all* black lives matter, including the hundreds of thousands of unborn black lives aborted each year, including the 7500 black lives murdered in the inner cities each year, and most fundamentally of all, that *all lives* matter?

### **Role of government**

Do my candidates recognize the proper and limited role of civil government? It is to our advantage that our founding document affirms that governments derive "their just powers by the *consent of the governed*." Powers exercised without consent are by definition usurpations and oppression. Governments do not have unlimited power. Our government only justly exercises

such powers as the people have consented to give them as indicated by our *Constitution* and as determined by the elected representatives and judges within the framework of that *Constitution*.

Christians understand two fundamental truths about governments.

### ***Need of government***

First, we understand the need of government. Human depravity requires it. We understand the dangers of anarchy and lawlessness. Scripture teaches us that the central role of the civil government is to punish evildoers and protect the innocent. So the Apostle Paul writes that the governing authorities are “instituted by God.” He labels them “servants of God” and “ministers of God,” exalted labels indeed (Rom 13:1, 4, 6). Civil governments “bear the sword,” serving God as “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom 13:4). Consequently, we see the need for the policing and judicial functions of civil government, restraining the bad guys within our borders.

Do my candidates honor the judicial process or do they join the mob in what used to be denounced as a “rush to judgment?” Do they believe in the presumption of innocence or guilt according to public opinion? Do they believe in trial by *media* or trial by *jury*? Do they wait for evidence or force events to fit into their preferred narrative? Do they want to defend the police or do they *defund* the police? The law enforcement process is imperfect and must be *semper reformanda*, always reforming. Nevertheless, where do the sympathies of my candidates lie? Do they *denounce* rioting, looting, and burning of buildings or do they look the other way, or even *excuse* the lawlessness while they *defame* law enforcement? The “peaceful and quiet life” which we seek in our prayer for our civil authorities will only be realized when laws are obeyed and order is maintained (1 Tim 1:1, 2). Social tranquility for us will not coexist with anarchy and social chaos.

The sword also represents the military function of the civil government, protecting the innocent when the bad guys from outside our borders threaten our well-being. Do my candidates understand the need for a strong military in a world of rogue states and bad characters? Do my candidates understand that protecting the folks at home sometimes means taking the battle to our enemies in far-away places?

We assigned a number of tasks to the civil government in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that previously had not been expected of it, and which it frankly has repeatedly shown its incompetence to do (e.g. health, education, welfare, housing). This has distracted our government from doing the one thing we all agree it should and must do: protect the innocent and punish wrongdoers. Do my candidates understand the need of the policing, judicial, and military functions of the civil government?

### ***Limits of government***

Second, we understand the need to limit the power of the civil government. John Cotton (1584-1652), the most important of the early American ministers, the pastor of First Church, Boston, writing on “The Limitation of Government” (1656)<sup>7</sup> set the tone for American civilization in saying,

Let all the world learn to give mortal men no greater power than they are content they shall use, for use it they will... it is necessary therefore, that all power that is on earth be limited.

One hundred and thirty years later James Madison (1751-1836) in Federalist Paper No. 51 summarized the tension in framing governments, saying,

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<sup>7</sup> This was written in the context of his exposition of Revelation 13.

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

*Obliging* the government that has been empowered to control the governed to also *control itself* is exactly the problem. The solution of Madison and the United States *Constitution* is the principle of the separation of powers and the diffusion of powers. Federal power is divided into three coequal branches of government:

- \* Executive (President)
- \* Legislative (Congress)
- \* Judicial (Courts)

This division of governing functions is not of divine inspiration. Yet it is in the interest of the long-term well-being of the Christian community that power not be concentrated in a single individual or political body. Do my candidates understand the importance of keeping these functions separate and not allowing one branch to usurp the functions of the other?

The recent Supreme Court hearings featuring Amy Comey Barrett provided something like a seminar on the separation of powers. Repeatedly she and others insisted that the judiciary must not become a “super-legislature.” Legislatures (Congress, General Assemblies) enact laws, executives (Presidents, Governors) implement laws, judges (state and federal courts) interpret

laws. This is what is meant by the rule of law. When judges are untethered from the actual text of law, when they rewrite laws or reinterpret laws to mean something other than what they meant when enacted, we no longer are ruled by law. We instead are ruled by the mere opinions or policy preferences of an unelected elite. The only alternatives to the rule of law are rule by a cadre of so-called experts, Plato's philosopher-kings, or the other extreme, rule by the mob. Our safety as a Christian community is far more secure when rooted in law than in the fickle decisions of a credentialed oligarchy, or the loud demands of the angry crowds. Again we ask, do our candidates understand the importance of the separation of powers, and not allowing power to be concentrated in a single branch of government, be it the President, Congress, or the Supreme Court?

Power is further *diffused* in the federal system by the enumerating of the powers of the federal government, that is, those powers are specified and listed. According to the 9<sup>th</sup> Amendment, all unenumerated rights, unnamed and unspecified by the *Constitution*, belong to or are "retained by the people."

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others *retained by the people*.

In other words, we see once again that our system of government, as evidenced in the *Constitution* and the *Bill of Rights*, does not grant rights but recognizes them. Those rights that are unspecified or unnamed are not denied to exist or retained by the federal government, but understood to belong to the people.

Further clarification is expressed by the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment:

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are *reserved* to the *States* respectively, or to the *people*.

We recognize that this federal system did not come down Sinai with Moses. It is a human-constructed system. Yet it is to the advantage of the Christian community that power is diffused. Do my candidates understand the importance of not allowing power to be concentrated in Washington, given the principle that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely? Do my candidates recognize the rights of the states and the rights of the people? The power of the federal government consists only of that specified by the *Constitution*. Its powers are named and limited. What powers that are unnamed, unspecified, and undelegated are said to belong to the states and the people. Power is diffused.

Most oppression against the citizens of any given nation has been not a result of the actions of individuals or corporations or private organizations, but governments. When rights are violated, when due process is denied, when citizens are falsely imprisoned, when churches are closed and believers are persecuted, it is at the hands of governments. Most violence against the citizens of any given nation has been at the hands of its own government. It is governments that have pursued genocidal policies, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century well knows: witness the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Communist China, Communist North Korea, and so on. We Christians must not be naïve. Every law has a loaded gun at the end of it. Resist the most trivial of laws, keep on resisting, then resist arrest, and finally one faces a loaded gun. This is why laws and government power must be kept to a minimum. This is why we must not empower the government to restrict our political opponents because that power one day may be turned upon us. Do my candidates

understand the importance of limiting government power or do they see an empowered government as the solution to all of society's problems?

Do my candidates understand the importance of mediating institutions, such as civic organizations and above all the family? Do they understand that the government cannot rear children? Only the family is competent to do so. Do my candidates understand that? Some candidates have said that if an 8 to 10 year old boy comes home and declares that he is actually a girl, that there can be no discrimination against that child's decision to so-called "transition." Do my candidates support this insanity? Do my candidates support the rights of parents to determine how they will rear their children or will they empower the government to intervene and place the children of politically-incorrect parents in a more "supportive" environment?

Do my candidates understand the importance of marriage as the foundation of the family and of society, and define it as the union of one man and one woman for life? Do they understand that whatever "Gay marriage" is, it is not marriage? Do they stand against normalizing polygamy, polyandry, and other domestic arrangements? Do they understand that children need a mother and a father (not two mothers or two fathers, or three mothers and one father, etc.) and that each sex has distinctive contributions to make that cannot be duplicated by two parents of the same sex? Do they understand that the traditional arrangement is that which best promotes human flourishing?

These are all wisdom issues. These are all issues which Christians ought to contemplate as they exercise their right and responsibility to vote. Is the approaching wave a true tsunami or a passing swell? What do my candidates say about basic human rights, about equality, and about the role of government and its limits? The political arrangements envisioned by the two ends of

the political spectrum create very different worlds, one to our advantage, one to our disadvantage. We can ill afford to be ignorant, naïve, or dismissive.

Rod Dreher in his recent book *Live Not By Lies* (title taken from a quote by Solzhenitsyn), has collected the testimonies of survivors of Soviet and Eastern European Communism, warning that the restrictions of speech and the classifying of people according to their group identity (substituting race and gender for class) is ominously reminiscent of their Marxist totalitarian past.<sup>8</sup> This coupled with the powers of surveillance enabled by 21<sup>st</sup> century technology make possible what Dreher calls a “soft totalitarianism.” The government has the tools already by which to shut down unwanted expression of undesirable groups. Let us be wise as serpents and innocent as doves as we exercise our right to vote, understanding that the welfare of God’s people is tied to the welfare of the nation in which we reside as exiles.

The world generally is a hostile environment for the church. Jesus warned that in the world we would have tribulation (Jn 6:33). He warned that even as the world hated and persecuted Him, so it would also hate and persecute us (Jn 15:18, 20). The early church knew what it was to be victimized by the arbitrary whims of kings and emperors (e.g. Mt 14:1-12; Acts 12:1-2) and the outbursts of violent mobs (Acts 14:19ff; 16:19ff; 19:21ff; 21:27-22:29). The American system of protected rights and diffused powers is, in our view, the best system yet devised by humanity for protecting the church when those who govern embody that worldly hostility.

Indeed, America has provided a hospitable home for evangelical Christianity all the way back to Jamestown (1607) and Massachusetts Bay (1630). We’ve not been martyred as have been Christians in Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. We’ve not been

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<sup>8</sup> Rod Dreher, *Live Not By Lies* (New York: Sentinel, 2020).

persecuted as have been Protestants in France, Spain, Italy, and Latin America. We have thrived in the environment of freedom. Equally notable, we've not even been ravaged by modernity and secularism as has Europe, faith all but disappearing in the former home of Christendom. America has been the great exception. Christianity has flourished here, maintaining astonishingly high percentages of believers and church attendance. Some historians have even referred to America in times in her history as an "Evangelical Empire."

Will this continue to be the case into the future? Time will tell. We see a gathering storm. The signs of a tidal wave are present, as we have detailed. The political, moral, social, and religious trends of the next few years likely will prove decisive. May God guide the American people as they make the decisions, and may American Christians be ever vigilant.