

On Liberals and Conservatives

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But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Philippians 3:20-21

I am blessed to live in the United States of America. I am blessed to live in a country with a representative form of government, which has been freely elected by its citizenry, and with a system of checks and balances between the major branches of government to guard against abuse of power. Despite all the problems and challenges this nation faces, as an American, I know I have enjoyed freedoms and opportunities, which are rare in the world.

In a free and open society as this, it should really come as no surprise that government finds expression in a two-party system, which sets so-called *liberals* on the left against so-called *conservatives* on the right. To understand this strong polarization, it's helpful to realize that in the ideal, both parties begin from a good and noble place. Political liberals place a high value on freedom, compassion and inclusion. The chief obstacle to a liberal agenda is that human need is so overwhelming, and the resources to address it are limited, and can often only be found by violating the freedoms of others. Political conservatives place a high value on responsibility, truth and morality. The leading obstacle to a conservative agenda is that people do not operate from the same standard of truth and morality, and therefore do not see responsibility in the same way either. Add to this volatile mixture political self-interest and survival, and one can

understand the frustration, anger, name-calling and gridlock, which often characterizes the American political scene.

Thankfully, American government at all levels functions mostly to maintain a safe and orderly society, and to offer services that all or most can agree on. In other words, most of what government does is quite apolitical and benefits us all. For issues that are more politically charged, what is normally hammered out is some sort of compromise, which feels like ... compromise, and is therefore less than completely satisfying for both sides. It certainly feels less than righteousness, but perhaps this is the best human government can offer.

If you find yourself increasingly anxious or agitated over political outcomes, remember the disappointment of idols, and give yourself a break from your television. Our hearts are idol factories, constantly churning out errant loves. We like to turn what are often good things into ultimate things: education, wealth, career, influence, pleasure, recreation, sports, health, marriage, family. These can all be good things, but when we over-desire them, placing them at the center of our hearts, thinking that they will fulfill us or give our lives meaning, we become enslaved and controlled by them. The result is always frustration and disillusionment, because these things can never fill the center place only God was meant to fill. God has set up the world so we will never find ultimate satisfaction in the things this life offers. A friend of mine, who was a church administrator, did a graduate research paper on the direct correlation between the local college football team losing a Saturday night game, and a precipitous drop in church attendance and giving on Sunday morning. We should be honest about our idols. They often reveal themselves in disappointments out of proportion to the circumstance. We must continually lay them down.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:25-26

The American political process is a good thing. It is a blessing that the citizens of this country have a say. It is a privilege to vote, to be active for causes we believe in, to run for elected office. The natural disappointments we may feel over political outcomes should turn us to the hope we have in Christ. Our ultimate citizenship is in heaven, and someday we will live under his righteous rule, and we will see just how good his governance will be.

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.

Isaiah 26:3-4

When God is our center, our hope, the beauty we long for, our all in all, then and only then are we free to fully enjoy good things in their proper context as gifts from his hand, entrusted to us. Our restless souls will never find rest until we rest in Christ. Our hearts will never be satisfied until we are fully satisfied in him. The psalmist's self-talk is instructive and on target:

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. Psalm 43:5

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, liberalism and conservatism can also be found in our churches. Liberal churches tend to be stronger on love and acceptance, and

weaker on biblical truth. Thus, liberal churches tend to be more silent on sin, preferring to focus on the love of God. The problem here is that the love of God loses meaning apart from his righteous wrath against sin, because it was for our sins that Christ suffered, bled and died. Remember from what we have been saved. God saves us *from himself, for himself*, and at great cost *to himself*. (see 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10) Without this truth, at the very least the gospel message is diminished, believers are not exhorted to holiness and purity according to God's standards, and silence is received as license.

Conservative churches, on the other hand, tend to be stronger on biblical truth, but weaker when it comes to love and acceptance. Thus, conservative churches tend to be more legalistic, self-righteous and judgmental, and sometimes plain unfriendly. However, love is supposed to be the distinguishing and commonly held characteristic among Christ followers. (see John 13:35, 1 John 4:19) And the standard of that love is the love that Christ has for us, which must extend to those who are different from us and who struggle in ways we are unfamiliar with. (see John 13:34, James 3:2) At the very least, the absence of love is a failure to actually live out the truth of the gospel, and leaves the message in the hands of messengers without beauty or attraction. Of course, truth and love are not exclusive choices, and the righteousness of Christ always demands both.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. Philippians 1:9-11