

PASTOR'S NOTES. Biblical Perspectives on Politics... Part 5

*Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to Him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."*

*Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him (Deuteronomy 6:13).'"* (Matthew 4:8-10, NRSV)

One of things that disquieted me when I saw it, and upset me for a while afterwards, was when I pondered this passage and realized it only makes sense in hindsight. Jesus would not have had any temptation Himself of worshipping Satan; very few people are tempted to worship Satan. What is a common temptation is to have the power of the kingdoms of the world. Why? For some it is for their desire to be powerful or important. But others of us have seen how kingdoms have promoted evil in the world on the one hand, and how countries can solve problems of society on the other. Countries have brought clean water to their people, allowed food to get where it's needed, provided education, fire protection, police protection, and legal protections for people who could not afford any of these things on their own. Surely it must be a temptation (even for God) to step in and stop governments that are promoting genocide, war, and the leaders are grabbing all resources for themselves.

I believe that Matthew tells this story because Jesus originally shared it with His disciples. When I read it that way, I realize that though we may picture this as a story of a red guy with horns and a pitchfork showing off the kingdoms, that's not how Jesus would have experienced it at the time. More likely, Jesus himself looks over the kingdoms of the world, ponders how cruel and God-less they are, and considers that He Himself could go in and fix them quickly. It is only after pondering this thought that He comes to the conclusion that the temptation to take the nations and fix them is really from the Devil, and giving in to it would be worshipping him. Perhaps you might come up with a different explanation, but this one makes the most sense to me and is consistent with the way I see temptations work in people's lives.

But that's a hard story for me to hear. All my life I was taught to be political. In this country, we have the freedom to vote, and we can play a role in creating and maintaining a society that is fair, just, and embodies the freedom and love of Christ. And in my experience, most of the people I've known who take on leadership positions in their communities do so with a desire to contribute positively to society. So the idea that there is a point where this could drift into devil worship was disturbing to me. We wouldn't know at the time that we were worshipping the devil, we would only realize it later.

Consider this: I believed that everyone should be active in their community, and aligning with a political party is usually the most effective way to make positive changes or preserve the things that are important. I still believe this, but I realized that rarely could or should any political party claim to be the "Christian" party. In order to do that, a party would have to have as its base agenda what Paul tells us is the fundamental of our faith: to share "that Christ died for us, was buried, rose again and appeared to many witnesses" (1 Corinthians 15:1-8). Beyond that, very little else would matter. However, persons disagree about other matters in creating a society, even if they are all Christians. This is why Christians are represented in many different political parties, including Democrats and Republicans. Few of those parties require you to be a Christian, and proclaiming Christ is not their fundamental mission (nor should it be).

So immediately Christians find themselves in two worlds: the eternal world where all that matters is abiding in Christ, and helping others to do so, and the temporary world where decisions need to be made about organizing and how best to meet the needs of the community, and in this world caring people can have many different opinions.

So how do we balance the two? How do we avoid slipping into devil worship?

For me, the second step (after realizing that no significant political party's agenda is the Christian one) is to recognize how sin creeps in. As I said, many people are in leadership because they want to help others. But whether it was the original intention or not, many people in leadership get addicted to the power of their position, may feel themselves superior to others, and may be looking to their own interests first. Those persons have slipped into devil worship. At that point their words can't be trusted. I suspect most of you are aware that leaders lie, make promises they don't intend to keep, make issues of problems they don't intend to fix (if they did fix them, how would they keep power?), and focus on the "evils" of their opponents (usually misrepresenting their positions). Most of us are aware of this, and yet we buy into the idea that another political party is "evil" and anyone connected with it, and we believe people on our side when they misrepresent people on the other. If that applies to you (I'm afraid for most it does), then you have already begun the descent into devil worship.

But consider what could be. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 that "*there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone* (vss. 4-6)." He then goes on to use the image of a body, which has different parts that have different jobs, but all serve the body, and that is how it is supposed to be with the body of Christ. We have been gifted in different ways, and we have different experiences and ways of looking at the world. Paul is speaking about the church, but this principle could apply to our society at large. There is the potential to bring together these differences and do creative and wonderful things for the people around us. That's what political parties (and indeed, the very reason for a "United States of America") were meant to be – a place where the different points of view could have a voice, and to make sure that certain needs were not missed or forgotten.

So we need to stay vigilant. The temporary world has many distractions, and we can always drift into a life that is not truly life. I'm not ready to throw out politics completely (some Christian groups have), but I try to recognize that our politics cannot save us, and the eternal world is where our hope lives.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive, flowing style.