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## Does Christianity Transcend All Our Political Disagreements?

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### Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Christians don't just disagree on political principles or on a number of political conclusions. Christians disagree on how Christianity and politics relate to each other in the first place.

In this episode of Life and Books and Everything, Kevin reads his recent article in WORLD opinions, "Does Christianity Transcend All Our Political Disagreements?"

### Transcript

[music] Greetings and salutations. This is Life in Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung.

I'm reading today my latest article in World Opinions. Be sure to check out World Opinions Online. This article is entitled "Does Christianity Transcend All Our Political Disagreements?" Right and Wrong Ways to Think about Christianity and Politics.

This is a continuing part of the series that I've been doing in World Opinions, thinking about a number of different questions related to Christianity and politics. So here's the latest. Americans are polarized by politics.

Everyone recognizes that political differences in this country are deep and seem to be growing. The division is present everywhere, including in the church. Moreover, Christians don't just disagree on political principles or on a number of political conclusions.

Christians disagree on how Christianity and politics relate to each other in the first place. In an essay, it's impossible to even begin to sketch a proper answer to such a massive topic, but maybe we can set a few planks in place, playing off of Richard Neiber's famous Christ and culture categories, by noting what is right and wrong with four common approaches. 1. Christianity Against Politics.

Christians with this approach are usually happy to blast both parties, or all parties if you have more than two. They may believe that politics is important and that voting matters and that certain issues really matter, but Christianity is largely seen as something that stands opposed to the messy, often idolatrous world of politics. On the positive side, this approach understands that the gospel of Christ is not mainly about fixing the social order, and that the Bible was not written to lay out a political system.

The Christianity Against Politics approach is strong on warning Christians against putting too much hope in kings and in earthly kingdoms. On the negative side, Christians with this approach are often uninterested in learning the intellectual contours of political science or in the long history of moral philosophy. They can also be unrealistic about how political and social change happens.

Politics is about the art of the possible, which requires making the best out of a fallen world filled with sinful people and imperfect systems. 2. Christianity Above Politics. In this approach, Christianity is seen as "the truth" capital T that transcends all earthly systems.

Christians with this approach are interested in the study of politics and in the various historical isms that have been tried in the political realm. These Christians believe that the gospel provides the proper critique to all man-made systems of political, economic, and social ordering. On the positive side, this approach understands that Christianity is not to be identified with any particular political philosophy, political party, or intellectual tradition.

On the negative side, the gospel critiques can often be superficial and lead to a sloppy moral equivalence. Thus, the Christian approach ends up being the supposed "golden mean" between conservatism and progressivism, or the imaginary midpoint between Marxism and capitalism. Every historical system, no matter how evil or how failed, gets presented with a few strings and a few weaknesses, and none is really better or worse than another.

3. Christianity as Politics. In this approach, the message of Christianity and the task of the individual Christian is seen as irreducibly political. For some Christians, this entails a civil religion that blends elements of American history, democratic sensibilities, and national patriotism with Orthodox Christianity.

For others, Christianity as politics looks like a bold plan for social transformation, political conquest, and the exercise of power in an effort to bring about a truly Christian culture. On the positive side, Christians with this approach understand that Jesus is Lord overall. They recognize that there is no domain called politics that can be, or should be, quarantined off from the rest of Christian discipleship.

On the negative side, this approach often has too much already and too little, not yet.

Christians with this approach can also be dogmatic about policies and prescriptions that are prudential matters needing Christian wisdom and forbearance. This approach often neglects the doctrine of the spirituality of the church and can lose sight of the fact that the church's power, competence, and mission are not unlimited.

4. Christianity under politics. In this approach, Christian ideas and Christian communities are seen as essential to a healthy political order. Christians with this mindset are often eager to defend Western civilization in the Anglo-American tradition of Republican, small R, virtue, and ordered liberty.

Christianity is valued as foundational and indispensable for the human pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful. On the positive side, this approach understands and appreciates the role of Christianity and the role it has played in the development of Western culture and in the establishment of a free and prosperous people. There is also wisdom in recognizing that Christianity does not offer a full-blown political philosophy, but that the best moral philosophy will be built upon a Christian view of the human person and of human nature.

On the negative side, this approach can reduce the Christian faith as something of utilitarian value. The church, its mission, its doctrine, and its worship often become secondary, while the nation-state or a civilizational tradition becomes primary. There is a danger that Christians become more zealous for liberty or social justice or national greatness than for Jesus Christ, for the gospel, and for the glory of God.

So where does this leave us? I don't have my own neatly labeled approach to offer, but appropriating the insights in each approach while avoiding the dangers would be a good place to start. We need an approach to politics that is engaged, but not idolatrous, transcendent, but not relativizing, culture shaping, but also constrained, supportive of a broader Christianity infused tradition, while also insisting that Christ is our first love, and not that tradition.

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