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How to Think about Christianity and Politics

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

No doubt, we need a lot of smart people reflecting on the intellectual principles and the practical priorities of our moral philosophy. That's a crucial conversation. But that's not the conversation most ordinary people are having online, in church, and around the dinner table. They (and I should say we) are having a messy—but if done right, a really important—conversation about how to approach the conversation itself. As Christians in an age dominated by politics, we are trying to think about how we should think about Christianity and politics.

In this episode of Life and Books and Everything, Kevin reads from the first of a series of articles he wrote for WORLD Opinions on how to think about Christianity and politics.

Transcript

[Music] Greetings in salutations! This is Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung. Today I have an article just recently came out in world opinions.

Do check out world opinions. Where I write every couple of weeks and lots of other good folks there as well. This is called How to Think about Christianity and Politics Life and Books and Everything.

This is the beginning of what I hope is going to be an intermittent series of several articles, something I've been giving a lot of thought about, and hopefully something in here might be helpful. Subtitle, having an important conversation on how to approach the conversation. In a recent essay for First Things, Ross Douthit, a serious Catholic and a conservative columnist for the New York Times, begins with his group of colleagues, and the author of the book, The New York Times, and the author of The New York Times.

begins with his question, how should contemporary Christians react to the decline of their churches, the secularization of the culture, the final loss of Christendom? Now granted we aren't watching the literal sacking of Rome as in Augustine's day, but Douthit's pessimistic assessment of our age is not far from the mark. If the Christian

foundations of the West have not been wholly eradicated, Christian assumptions certainly have been. The relationship between Christianity and Western civilization is now more antithesis than synthesis.

It should come as no surprise then that Christians are talking and arguing a lot about politics. We are all trying to figure out what is going on, where we are headed, and how to respond. No doubt we need a lot of smart people reflecting on the intellectual principles and the practical priorities of our moral philosophy.

That's a crucial conversation, but that's not the conversation most ordinary people are having online in church and around the dinner table. They, and I should say we, are having a messy, but if done right a really important conversation about how to approach the conversation itself. As Christians in an age dominated by politics, we are trying to think about how we should think about Christianity and politics.

This column begins a series of columns that will try to help us think about what we need to think about. To that end, I want to address six questions. One, why is it so hard to talk about politics? Two, are Christians too focused on politics? Three, should Christians be engaged in the culture war? Four, does Christianity transcend all our political philosophies and disagreements? Five, is the church the problem? And six, what is the need of the hour? Let's start with the first question.

Here are four reasons we are having such a hard time talking about politics. Number one, the internet. There are probably just as many angry and crazy people in the world a generation ago, but they didn't have the access or ability to tell the whole world their angry and crazy opinions.

Long gone are the days of three networks and Walter Cronkite signing off triumphantly with, and that's the way it is. There is now no consensus on the way it is. There is no voice or institution that everyone trusts.

The most influential platforms only need to attract a tiny segment of passionate followers to be a big deal. This incentivizes coming up with the hottest hot takes, and because we have access to more stories and more tragedies than ever before, there will always be vivid examples in the news to confirm the way we already see things. Two, polarization.

It's not just that our two major political parties are more distinct than they used to be, in part because one party now clearly opposes abortion and one party now clearly celebrates abortion. People are more separated than they used to be. We are sorting ourselves digitally and geographically into like-minded hives.

Humans are tribal creatures. With the decline of religion and family in the rise of national or global culture at the expense of localism, we have gravitated toward ideological clans,

and like clan loyalty of old, we can always find ways to defend our clan while defining ourselves based on being the opposite of the other clan. Three, politics has become the lingua franca of our age.

Walk through the airport, and every television is showing other news or sports. These are two things that we are all supposed to know about and care about. Everything has become politicized with commercials, corporations, education, entertainment, and sports itself, deciding that everything should be about everything.

Staying in your lane is seen as not doing your part in the great struggle of our age. Ironically, the one institution charged with being political, Congress, has become a platform for individual branding more than a place where political matters are debated and political compromises are reached. Four, Christianity has often struggled to find a settled formal political philosophy.

Just among reformed Christians, we have quietists, theonomists, neo-kiparians, God and country types, and advocates of two kingdom theology. What's more, Christians with the same formal theology can have very different cultural instincts. For all the weaknesses of Richard Nevers Christ in Culture, we can see his five models, Christ Against Culture, Christ Above Culture, Christ Of Culture, Christ In Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture, as basic and usually unstated intuitions at work in the church.

Even the label "conservative" as a political ideology is unsettled, with leading thinkers arguing for or against everything from populism to nationalism to republicanism to fusionism to classic liberalism to Catholic integralism. Christians are having a hard time thinking and talking about politics because almost everyone is having a hard time thinking and talking about politics. We are not worse than others, but maybe with open hearts and clear heads, we can be a little better.

That's my world opinions article, how to think about Christianity and politics. The first of six articles I hope to write across the summer months and answer those six questions I mentioned earlier. So next, our Christians to focused on politics will be the next in the series and then hopefully the other four in time.

Until then, read a good book, glorify God, and enjoy him forever.

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[buzzing]