

Voices: Jesus' gospel is for the individual and community

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Twenty years ago, Stephen L. Carter wrote in *God's Name in Vain*, "Politics needs morality, which means that politics needs religion."

However, he also cautioned, "A religion that becomes too settled in the secular political sphere, happily amassing influence and using it, is likely to lose its best and most spiritual self."

Carter additionally warns, "Religion, which should be in love with witness and persuasion, has all too often in history allowed itself to be seduced by the lure of temporal power, a passionate but dysfunctional and even immoral love affair that has led to much human misery and has been destructive as well of true faith."

It is safe to say the situation has not appeared to improve over the last two decades. And so, today we ask, "What is the proper role for faith in American politics?"

Individual or community gospel

American Christianity, specifically evangelicals, can be divided into two camps: (1) an individual-focused theology and (2) a community-focused theology.

The first group sees the world and views theology through an individual-focused gospel. The individual needs to be right with God; sin impacts the individual; Jesus saves the individual; individuals are responsible for their actions; and as Christians, individuals have the responsibility to share the

gospel with other individuals.

The individual viewpoint does not give much credence to group experiences or viewpoints or systemic issues impacting society. It is a personal faith, expressed individually.

The second group views the world and theology through a community-focused gospel. How do our actions corporately impact others? How are we as a people responding to God? How are we bringing the kingdom of God in the here and now?

This group does address issues in a systemic way, seeking reforms to create a more just society. Individual faith is still important, but there are social sins and social callings to be focused upon.

Divided focus

Whichever approach an American Christian takes greatly impacts the way he or she sees the world, and specifically how he or she views American politics.

These groups increasingly divided after the Civil War, as the individual-focused gospel approach placed a heavy emphasis on an individual theology, an End Times understanding that meant the world could not be saved, and mainly focused on saving individuals through evangelism. Addressing systemic issues was seen as a distraction from the gospel.

In the 1970s, following the civil rights movement and the sexual revolution of the 1960s, individual-focused Christians fully entered the political fray as a voting bloc in the Republican Party, where they have remained for the last 40 years. The focus on religious individualism paired well with the political individualism of the GOP.

On the other hand, the community-focused gospel approach saw systemic

issues that needed reform—such as child labor laws, poverty, abolition and civil rights—as a spiritual calling.

While sermons from individual-focused Christians centered on personal morality, individual choices and certain personal vices, community-focused sermons engaged societal sins, the need for reforms and advocating for social justice.

The community-focused group, due to its relatively small size, has had limited influence on American politics over the past 40 years but still maintains a presence in the Democratic Party, where the focus on community pairs well with the Democratic Party's focus on society.

These two camps have become increasingly partisan, thus aligning with the political parties in America in a very strict way. In fact, an individual-focused Christian will find more comfort with conservative atheists than with liberal Christians. And community-focused Christians will find more comfort with liberal secularists than with conservative Christians, as each group identifies more with political ideology or tribal party than with denomination or faith.

Numbers-wise, it should be noted far more white American Christians identify with the individual-focused gospel and thus with conservative politics than with the community-focused gospel.

Bridging the divide

American Christians increasingly are partisan, lacking independence and committed to tribalism. Are we missing something as Christians when we only live out half of our theology? Are we diminishing our influence and power of our witness?

Perhaps the question to ask ourselves as we wrestle with how much

partisan politics drives our theological insights, rather than the other way around is: Is there a better way we as Christians should and can respond?

Consider two parables, placed back-to-back in Matthew 25. In verses 14-30, we read the parable of the talents, where individual actions are rewarded or condemned. The message from this parable aligns neatly with individual-focused Christians—hard work and individual responsibility are rewarded.

Then, Matthew 25:31-46 shines the light on our social responsibilities as Christians—how we are living out justice in our society. This parable most aligns with community-focused Christians.

But here is the reality: Jesus embraced both approaches to the gospel—individual and community. We should be mindful to imitate him in our approach to politics in this country.

As longtime Baptist scholar and leader T.B. Maston wrote: “The gospel we preach and teach is not an individual gospel or a social gospel. It is a gospel that knows no limits in its application to life. It is a message for the total man, and hence it is also a message for every aspect of the world in which we live.”

This does not mean we as Christians must agree on every political issue, but we can find commonality in how we engage politics.

Jasmine L. Holmes writes: “[We] want to speak out above the din, calling our brothers and sisters in Christ to a higher, biblical standard that makes them unafraid of admitting where the other side is right and pointing out where they are both wrong.”

May we in 2022 commit ourselves—through openness, reflection and grace—to consider how we might engage in the important political questions of our day with an attitude that would be reflective of the fullness of the gospel, ready to respond to God’s presence in our lives as we

traverse the days ahead.

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