

Voices: The politics of Jesus' narrow gate

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Jesus famously told his followers to “enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

In my Baptist tradition, this is applied most commonly to the theological understanding of individual salvation, particularly the idea of eternal life—whether someone is going to heaven or hell.

We quote it when we see people fail to convert from our evangelical attempts, when we see them fall away from faithful commitment to our churches and institutions, and when we feel like the media, celebrities or even culture at large is poking fun at our faith.

This is not an incorrect understanding of Jesus's teaching, as he certainly knew many would struggle with his messianic claims and fail to trust him and all he came to provide humanity.

Ironically, it *is* incorrect to narrowly reduce Jesus's narrow-gate teaching to referring only to one's eternal destiny.

Jesus' teaching about his way

Let me remind you, this teaching comes toward the end of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, which is focused heavily on a way of salvation that influences one's whole life—from one's ethics to one's eternity.

This sermon begins by pronouncing blessings on the poor in spirit, those

who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted because of righteousness (Matthew 5:3-10).

Jesus's narrow-gate analogy cannot be completely understood divorced from the way of life he begins calling disciples to with these jarring words and elaborates upon throughout the rest of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

Unfortunately, in a world that values power, status and getting our way, we prefer to see the narrow gate as merely something one can step through by assenting to a mental belief in the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, without this having any bearing on the way we interact with the rest of the world. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this is "cheap grace."

It is not by accident Jesus utters this narrow-gate teaching right after saying, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (7:12), and right before warning his followers about false prophets whose faith will not match their "fruits" (7:15-20).

The reason the narrow gate is so narrow is because it not only impacts what one mentally believes, but also the whole trajectory toward which one orients one's life—toward the kingdom of God over earthly governments and powers.

Narrow way in culture and politics

This is where the proverbial rubber hits the proverbial road for us in the local church. For many years, we have enjoyed a so-called Christian majority in our country and state. Whether this majority was completely authentic is questionable, but that is beside the point.

We now live in a time when everyone does not mentally ascent to the

majority interpretation of Jesus's narrow way. When this becomes evident in the political sphere, the knee-jerk reaction of some Christians and political groups is to fight.

I did not become a pastor to fight in culture wars. I became one to share the gospel that leads to life in both our ethics and eternity. Thankfully, I have been mostly blessed in my ministry to serve among people who share this conviction.

Not every pastor can say this. I spoke to two pastors recently who inadvertently have become wrapped up in other people's political agendas. Ultimately, they both refused to take sides, no doubt alienating themselves from those people.

Their fellow believers in this struggle may see them as "unchristian" or "traitors." Others may see them as being no better than their opponents. To these two pastors, I say: "You have found the narrow road."

One cannot be the blessed disciple Jesus calls us to be in the Sermon on the Mount if one's greatest Christian priority is banning books, controlling libraries or co-opting pastors. It may be a valid priority for some, but let them not refer to it as distinctly "Christian" or "Gospel."

On the other hand, Christians can and should be expected to vote and advocate for their values in the public square with honesty and integrity. We do this with the awareness it will not magically result in a society that favors us or our faith, but as the overflow of following in the narrow-gate way of Jesus.

Commenting on this, Shane Claiborne writes: "Christianity is at its best when it is peculiar, marginalized, suffering, and it is at its worst when it is popular, credible, triumphal, and powerful" (*Jesus for President*, 165).

If these words seem counterintuitive to you, spend some time reading the

Sermon on the Mount.

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