

A Consequential Election

by Pastor Marty

I recently voted. I expect and hope most of you did as well. Many people have described this election as a historical and pivotal event in our nation's history. Of course, we cannot know for sure what history will record until after the fact, but there are certainly more than enough reasons to consider this election significant for the country. Now, I am not going to get into the political arena much in this newsletter because politics are extremely temporary in the eternal scheme of things. However, I will say that I may have learned as much from Facebook over the last year as I did from watching and reading the news. Even in my very small circle of friends, I have seen that Christians can be found on both sides of every issue, and even when the views are extremely contrary, they use "godliness and love" to defend their positions. To be honest, I find this tendency extremely troubling because even though some issues rely exclusively on the person's perspective, at least some have to be more absolute. For example, some issues—like setting the minimum wage, salaried employees getting overtime, or even healthcare—don't fit the definition of absolutes because those issues depend on our economy and culture. However, there are other issues that directly relate to the nature of God and His Word. We may approach the issue from slightly different viewpoints, but as Christians, we need to admit that God is not schizophrenic; some things are black and white.

Christians have to recognize that some things really are black and white to God.

C. S. Lewis made a very important point when he said that real love is much more stern than mere kindness; it requires us to look past temporary pleasure to recognize the result. It is this very act of looking beyond the immediate to see the ultimate that many Christians seem to have either forgotten or never learned to do.

The Church has become so nearsighted that she has lost the ability to analyze temporary things in light of eternal truth. If the early Church did anything, they often erred in the other extreme and sacrificed the immediate for the infinite. If every believer had taken Paul's advice to not be married, the Church would be a lot smaller than it is today. Nevertheless, Paul understood that temporary things are just that—temporary. He had the wisdom to distinguish between his own opinion and God's commands even while giving advice; he admitted to his own farsightedness. Today, the Body of Christ refuses to admit to a need for glasses and keeps walking into walls. Granted, I realize there are some who still do see clearly ... but every part of the body affects all the other parts of the body, so the weakness of one part becomes the weakness of all parts.

Every part of the Body affects the other parts of the Body, so we all become weak.

The diminished vision in the Body is very much related to our modern culture. Because we live in a digital age, we are surrounded by a constant deluge of opinions-presented-as-facts. It is the nature of the internet: anybody can be an authority on anything. Of course, personal opinions aren't inherently bad things, but they are not identical to facts—and even facts are subject to interpretation. As Christians, we are responsible for evaluating everything we say or believe according to God's Word. Although it is dangerous to put this in writing, I would even advise against "relying on the Holy Spirit" to inform our opinions because if we cannot see clearly, we cannot hear clearly. It is terribly easy for us to interpret our own feelings as the leading of the Spirit. Hebrews tells us we can train our senses to discern good and evil, but it is neither automatic nor instinctive; it requires both discipline and practice. The Bible tells us

to pray without ceasing, but most of us have to apply effort before it becomes a regular habit. In the same way, we have to make a decision to analyze our opinions according to God's Word so we can identify our weaknesses. However, many of us have never learned how to do this; instead, we accept our beliefs because we have strong feelings about them. The major problem with passion-based beliefs is that any argument can be supported from an emotional viewpoint.

The danger with passion-based beliefs is all arguments can use emotional support.

As an example, let's review the current idea of increasing the minimum wage. This is a topic that has clear economic facts as well as a lot of emotional arguments associated with it. I was a department head several years ago with hourly employees under me, and I had pushed to be able to start them at the highest hourly rate possible. The job was very involved, so a higher rate was justified. Even there, however, there was a downside: I could not hire as many people, and I could not give very many raises. Those were economic-based facts. With a very limited budget, paying people more inherently meant reducing services to customers, having employees work fewer hours, and hiring fewer people. There were no other options. The staff I did hire were glad for the higher pay, but all the people I could not hire would gladly have had a job at a lower rate. This is a good example of an issue with both facts and emotional arguments. Facts indicate that a certain amount of money can only pay a certain amount of people. If my total budget only fits \$80/hour, then I can hire 8 people at \$10/hour, or I can hire 10 people at \$8/hour. From an emotional perspective, those who had the job deserved the higher rate, for it was an involved, skill-based job; however, the 2 additional people who really needed a job and would gladly do the work for \$8/hour had every reason to resent the situation. Both emotional arguments had merit, but neither of them had

any effect on the economic facts. Additionally, this scenario has not even begun to consider if the number of employees affects how well the department grows or serves customers down the road. Likewise, the whole issue of minimum wages is emotionally polarized according to if a person has a job or needs a job; nevertheless, emotional arguments do not change the facts.

Emotional arguments rely on personal perspectives and do not change the facts.

As Christians, we are called (we might even say commanded) to love others. Jesus is also clear about setting our loves in order. Our primary love above all others has to be for God Himself; our secondary love is that we love one another in the Body of Christ; and our tertiary love is to everyone else, including our enemies. If C. S. Lewis is correct (and he is) that real love is much more stern than mere kindness, then we must begin evaluating our actions and our positions according to what real love actually is (compared to just being kind or making people happy) and what the real facts are. Regrettably, the Church has seemed to lose its way. Through history, the Church has often been the last line of defense against those forces that attempt to turn absolute issues into relative positions. As I have mentioned in previous newsletters, early Christians so understood the need for accuracy, facts, and truth that they sometimes took years to decide exactly what words they should use in a short phrase in one of the creeds. Being in a pagan society, they knew all too well how easy it was for the culture to pollute their theology. We only have to read the New Testament for a glimpse of this taking place in the congregation at Corinth, not to mention Galatia or some of the seven churches in the book of Revelation. If we do not learn to evaluate today's choices in light of tomorrow's results, we will be deceived.

We must learn how to evaluate today's issues in the context of tomorrow's results.

Over the past few decades, I have seen more and more Christians and churches accept and promote perspectives that are directly and decidedly contrary not only to God's Word but also to God's character. It seems like believers have gotten into a dangerous habit of deciding their views on issues almost solely based upon how they affect themselves or those they know at the present time. They have lost the ability to look down the road at all of the ramifications the decision may have. There is a famous saying that those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it, and it is true. What makes it true is that history shows us how the smallest actions can have the largest repercussions. I admit that I am sometimes horrified to hear people who I know to be Christian promoting a position that is directly intended to undermine the basic idea of absolute truth or morality. In those cases, I have to remind myself that though they are still believers, they do not know how to evaluate the actual results of their actions. They can only see directly in front of them; they can't see how certain decisions might actually affect future generations. Sadly, the Body of Christ in many parts of the world has become more like a teenager than an adult, unable to recognize the consequences of certain choices. There is a very great deal of "out of sight, out of mind" logic in the Church today. If we cannot learn to see the future, we will be doomed to repeat the past.

If we cannot learn to perceive the future, then we will be doomed to repeat the past.

One reason I am discussing this issue at this point is because it seemed to be especially apparent during this last election. Now, a lot of people are still very polarized in their emotions about this, which is understandable. However, I have learned something during the years I have taught students: how you get your answer can be as important as the answer itself. Every time people bet on which sports team will win some competition, half of the people are correct and

half are wrong. The results do not indicate the choices were based on good reasons. Often, people back their own team even when there are significant facts to the contrary. It often is the nature of sports. When it came to this last election, I observed a great deal of people, both Christians and non-Christians, polarized for the "home team" regardless of what was actually being said. The thing that distressed me a great deal, however, is the way the arguments mainly focused on personal perspectives instead of on actual facts and the eventual consequences. On both sides, some arguments even undermined the very core values that were being defended. If we cannot separate ourselves from our own emotional issues, our arguments will fall apart.

We have to separate ourselves from our emotional issues if we desire the truth.

Whatever we think about this election, it certainly was polarizing. However, that is not enough to make our decision. God holds us, as Christians, responsible for the part we play in the world around us. We have to consider each choice we make in light of its ramifications: we have to consider our choices not just for us and those we know but also for all those who come after us; not just for today but also for tomorrow and eternity; and not just for what seems good but for what really is good. In the Old Testament, we read that Solomon was the wisest man on the face of the earth. He had an understanding of more than almost anybody before or after him. Nevertheless, Solomon was a great failure when it came to following God's law, and the kingdom became divided because of his sin. He had every reason to know better, but he chose not to apply his knowledge and wisdom when his personal passions affected his decisions. From Scriptures, we know Solomon had hundreds of wives and concubines. He let his love for them turn his heart away from God. Prior to that time, God had clearly and strongly stated to Israel that they were not to marry into

the cultures around them, for if they did so, it would result in their hearts being turned away to serve and worship the idols of the nations. We need to always remember that God never says anything without a specific reason for it.

We have to remember that God never says anything without a specific reason.

If we think about it, Solomon was being diplomatic. The marriages served the nation of Israel by establishing peace with other nations; it was a common practice of the time. It is easy to look at Solomon and judge him as a sinful king, but we have to consider how his fall took place. He didn't marry all those foreign women in a single day. It was at the very beginning of his reign that he entered a marriage alliance with pharaoh by taking his daughter as his wife. This was contrary to God's commands in the Torah about marriages with the pagan nations. Now, this was before God had given Solomon wisdom after He appeared to him in a dream. Still, if we need God to speak to us personally before we apply His Word to our lives, we will be living very undisciplined lives. His alliance with Egypt was probably a politically-expedient thing, but it didn't show true forethought. If he had seen the long-term situation, he would have known God never says anything without a reason. It would be great if the Bible told us he did not make the same mistake after God gave him wisdom ... but regrettably, Solomon went on to marry 700 women, many of whom were from the other nations. He allowed his personal passions to decide his choices. If we look at his actions, there are only two options: 1) He let his personal passions override his knowledge of God's Word, or 2) He didn't consider how those personal choices might affect the future. If we think about it, they go together. If our passions affect our choices, we become nearsighted.

When our personal passions affect our choices, we become distinctly nearsighted.

A significant number of issues involved in this past election had to do with character. If we are honest, both of the main candidates had said and done things we wish they hadn't. To a very real extent, God holds us accountable for the part we play in the direction of this nation. We cannot just bury our heads in the sand and decide that we are exempt from responsibility. If we voted for one of the main candidates, we are responsible before God for those issues we supported and those we rejected; however, if we voted for a 3rd party, we are responsible for how we knew our personal choice would affect the actual result; and if we chose not to vote, we are responsible before God for choosing to not make a decision on the issues that actually relate to absolute morality. In some sense, it is a no-win situation whenever we have a choice between imperfect candidates; nevertheless, it is important that we do the best we can, which means analyzing the issues and then prioritizing some over others. The Bible tells us that for the one who knows the right thing and does not do it, it is sin; it does not say that God judges us for things beyond our control, but He does hold us accountable for our personal actions, and that also includes the consequences of our choices.

God holds us accountable not only for our actions but also for the consequences.

Some people viewed this election as a black-and-white choice between good and evil, and others prioritized some issues over others. In either case, God holds us accountable for the choices we made and whether or not we really considered the ramifications and consequences of those choices. As Christians, we must begin evaluating our positions not only according to His Word but also in light of the possible results of our choices. When we do, God gives us grace for those things we cannot change, but if we do not, God holds us accountable for the things we allowed to happen. If we desire truth, we have to choose to have eyes to see and ears to hear.