

## ***Letter to an Anti-Trump Christian Friend***

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*Townhall, August 8, 2020 [Note: This article is based on an actual letter. The recipient's name and some minor details have been changed.]*

Dear Zachary,

Thank you for your thoughtful, honest email explaining why you felt frustration and anger about my public support of Donald Trump. I'm glad that you wrote as you did rather than leaving the matter unspoken.

Thank you also for writing, as a long-time friend, to express your concerns that my support of Trump might jeopardize the reputation that I have built as a trusted professor of theology and ethics for the last 43 years, and that my pro-Trump stance undermines the credibility of the label "evangelical," and even of the Christian gospel itself.

I take these objections seriously. I have pondered them for several days. Please consider the following twelve points of response:

### **1. No consideration of policies**

At the beginning of your email, you write, "This email does not concern policy." The rest of the email concerns what you see as President Trump's character flaws.

But that means that your email fails to address the entire reason for my support of Trump. In every column that I've published in support of Trump, I have explicitly registered my disapproval of his character flaws and previous immoral behavior. I support him *because of* the policies he has enacted and will enact, and *in spite of* his character flaws (which I don't think rise to a level that would disqualify him from being president; more on this below).

This means that, as I read and re-read your eloquent email, I did not find it to be persuasive. It does not even acknowledge, much less argue against, the reasons why I continue to support President Trump.

A few months ago, while the impeachment trial was going on, a younger faculty colleague asked me at lunch, “What would Trump have to do to make you stop supporting him?” My response was something like this: “I would stop supporting him if he began to favor higher taxes, more government regulation, a weaker military, open borders, judges who believed in a “living Constitution,” extended abortion rights, restrictions on freedom of religion, hostility toward Israel...” I didn’t finish the list because he said, “Okay, the question for you is policies. I get it.” But your email did not discuss policies.

## **2. My last 56 years**

My conservative political views are not new. My convictions about the best political policies for a nation began long before I ever heard of Donald Trump. In 1964, as a high school junior, I read the book *A Choice, Not an Echo* by Phyllis Schlafly (a Washington University in St. Louis Law School grad) and I became convinced of conservative political policies (low taxes, smaller government, strong defense). I became president of the Young Republicans club at Memorial High School in Eau Claire Wisconsin, and helped campaign for Barry Goldwater against Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1964 election. (A very cute and fun girl named Margaret White was active in young Republicans with me – little did we know that in the year 2020 we would be celebrating our 51<sup>st</sup> wedding anniversary.)

During the 1968 election, as a junior in college, I attended a meeting of the Harvard Republican Club (yes, there was one!) and volunteered to stand on a freeway overpass in Boston holding a Richard Nixon campaign sign during the morning rush hour, because I thought his mostly-conservative policies would be far better for the nation than the liberal views of Hubert Humphrey.

In 1980, at a faculty panel discussion about the November election at Bethel College in St. Paul, I was the faculty speaker who spoke in favor of Ronald Reagan because his conservative policies were far better, and far more consistent with biblical standards, than the liberal policies of Jimmy Carter (an evangelical Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher) or the muddled views of third-party candidate John Anderson (an evangelical Christian). In other elections, I have similarly spoken and written in favor of George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, Mitt Romney, and others.

In 2010 (still pre-Trump), I argued extensively for numerous conservative political positions in my book *Politics According to the Bible*. So my support for Donald Trump is nothing new, but flows out of my deep and long-held political convictions that he also supports.

But your email addresses none of these policy issues, which have determined my political involvement for the last 56 years.

### **3. Am I sacrificing moral principles for the sake of political gain?**

You write, “It seems that you are elevating politics above the Bible. You are possibly sacrificing your calling ... for the sake of some judges in America who will last at max 15-20 years. You are putting the temporal in front of the eternal, and it worries me.”

Can you understand that I’m seeking to influence politics *because of the Bible*, because of my conviction that the Bible speaks to all of life? Like the Jewish people in exile in Babylon, I believe that we are called by God as Christians to be exiles on the earth and simultaneously to “seek the welfare of the city” (or today the country; Jeremiah 29:7) where God has called us to live as exiles.

Don’t you think that Jesus wants his disciples to influence the world for good? He said, “Let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your *good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Paul says that “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

When I wrote the book, *Business for the Glory of God*, I was trying to influence the business world for good. Was that putting the temporal in front of the eternal? I think it was trying to apply the teachings of the Bible to the business world, which is an important aspect of people’s lives today.

When I wrote the book, *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution*, I was trying to influence government leaders in the poor countries of the world to adopt laws and economic policies that would bring their nations from poverty to prosperity. Was that putting the temporal in front of the eternal? I think it was another example of trying to apply the teachings of the Bible to an important aspect of people’s lives today.

When I wrote the book, *Politics According to the Bible*, I was trying to influence the leaders of governments to adopt policies consistent with the principles of Scripture, and I thought this would be beneficial for the nations that did adopt these principles. Was that putting the temporal in front of the eternal? No, I think it was applying the teachings of the Bible to the functions of government.

I firmly believe that we as Christians should never intentionally sin in order to bring about what we think to be a good result (see my book *Christian Ethics*, chapter 7). For example, it would be morally wrong, and displeasing to God, if I ever were to tell a lie in order to promote a political candidate. It would be morally wrong for me to steal ballots or stuff a ballot box with fraudulent ballots. And I think it would be morally wrong for me to say or write that I approve of a political candidate's adultery, or falsehood, or embezzlement, and so forth.

But I see nothing wrong with speaking and writing in support of a certain political position or political candidate. Christian leaders have done that throughout the history of our country. And if I write an article saying that I *disapprove* of certain aspects of Donald Trump's conduct, but I also *support* him as a candidate, I see nothing morally wrong with that. If others say that supporting him *at all* is implicitly condoning all of his behavior, then they are carelessly or intentionally misrepresenting what I wrote.

#### **4. The choice is between two whole packages**

The question now facing the nation is not, "Does Donald Trump have an exemplary moral character?" or, "Does Donald Trump have flaws?" or even, "Do I like Donald Trump?" The question is, "Which of two package deals is better for the nation?"

(a) Donald Trump and Republican policies or

(b) Joe Biden and Democratic policies?

There are no other choices. The nation will either have the option (a) or option (b) as a whole package for at least the next four years, and probably longer. If I withhold support from Trump, that makes it easier for Biden to win, and thereby for Democratic policies to bring (in my opinion) great destructiveness to the nation (more specifics below.)

In making a choice between package (a) and package (b), questions about a candidate's character of course are relevant. But, to my mind, the question is not, "Does Donald Trump have flaws?" but rather, "Is Donald Trump so clearly unsuited to be president that our only valid choice is to accept package (b) and the great damage to the nation that (in my opinion) will flow from Joe Biden and Democratic policies?" When I ask the question in that way, the answer is clearly No, and it isn't even close. Package (a) is far preferable.

You mentioned possibly voting for a third party candidate. But that would not change the fact that the nation will have either package (a) or package (b). Therefore, a third party vote would be throwing away your opportunity to influence the government of this nation for good in the laws and policies it enacts. "Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it" (Proverbs 3:27). You have an opportunity (by voting) to help protect the nation from great harm that would come from the Democratic party policies (see below) and to help the nation by promoting the great good that would come from Republican party policies. These laws and policies will set the course of the nation for years to come in ways that will far outweigh any harm that might come from Donald Trump's abrasive behavior.

## **5. Trump is not perfect, but your criticisms are excessive and speculative**

At the heart of our disagreement is the fact that my evaluation of Donald Trump's character is more positive than your evaluation. Can we least agree that the evaluation of a person's character is a complex process that requires wise judgments based on a wide variety of factors, and that people can legitimately disagree in their honest assessments of someone else's character?

As for specific arguments, you begin by saying that Donald Trump does not measure up to the moral standards of the Bible, such as exemplified by the "blessed man" of Psalm 1. On this topic, I agree with you. The only man who truly fulfilled Psalm 1 was Jesus. Both Biden and Trump have flaws. The question is whether either one has such blatant flaws that they make him clearly unfit for the office of president.

I wrote this about Trump in a Townhall.com column in July, 2016:

*He is egotistical, bombastic, and brash. He often lacks nuance in his statements. Sometimes he blurts out mistaken ideas ... that he later must abandon. He insults people. He can be vindictive when people attack him .... He has been married three times and claims to have been unfaithful in his marriages. These are certainly flaws, but I don't think they are disqualifying flaws in this election.*

But you go much further than that, making statements that I see as unjustified speculation. For example, at several places you attribute to Trump only sinister motives. You write, "I don't think that Trump is interested in anything but division," and, "He wants people to hate each other."

Do you really know what his motives are? It is appropriate to be cautious in speaking about another person's motives. It is often difficult to know the motives in our own hearts regarding decisions that we make. And our evaluation of other people's motives is influenced significantly by our previous opinions about them.

I have posted on my website a list of [25 good things](#) that President Trump has done while in office, and dozens more could be added. Do these actions show evidence that he "wants people to hate each other"? Certainly not. In fact, I support all 25 of those actions.

If I evaluate Donald Trump's policies and actions not as a hostile observer but as a sympathetic observer, I think his actions are consistent with someone who is genuinely seeking to do good for the nation. The reason I favor the Republican policy positions that I mentioned above is *because I think they are best for the nation*, not because I'm interested in promoting division and not because I want people to hate each other. Is it not possible that Donald Trump similarly supports those Republican policy positions *for a good motive*, and that he too thinks they are best for the nation?

I recently had the opportunity to meet with several committed Christians who have worked in the White House since the beginning of Trump's presidency. In an entirely private conversation, they were convinced that Trump's decisions are based on what is best for the nation, and that he feels a sense of responsibility to do the best job possible with the office he has been given. These are people who have been on the inside of the workings of the White House. They impressed me as genuine, sincere, honest, wise Christians. Will you admit that their testimony carries some value? Might you be wrong about Trump's motives?

There is a real need for both pro-Trump and anti-Trump people to acknowledge the legitimacy of a middle-ground assessment of Donald Trump's character. On the one hand, Trump is not perfect, and I do not see any need to defend everything he says and does. On the other hand, Trump is not completely evil, completely corrupt, as many in the media wish to portray him.

My own assessment is, I think, a middle-ground perspective. Trump has flaws, but (by God's grace) he has, overall, done many good things as president. The mainstream media often refuses to say anything positive about him, but a balanced evaluation would also point out that he has a remarkable ability to get things done that no one else had been able to do (massive tax cuts, ending thousands of government regulations, moving our embassy to Jerusalem, building hundreds of miles of 18-foot to 30-foot high border wall, persuading NATO allies to increase their share of the funding). He has admirable courage, faithfulness to his promises, remarkable energy and diligence in the performance of his presidential duties, deep patriotism, and what seems to be a dominant motive of seeking what is best for the country (captured in the slogan, "Make America Great Again"). Do you think this perspective on Trump is a legitimate view to hold, even if you do not hold it yourself? Or do you think that your overwhelmingly negative view of Trump's character is the only legitimate conclusion to draw from the evidence?

**6. Both character and policies must be considered:** I am not saying that assessment of a candidate's character is irrelevant. There is a minimal standard of behavior which, if a candidate falls below it, would disqualify a candidate from governmental office. You may think that Trump has fallen beneath such a standard. I do not. But this is a judgment call that each person has to make -- about every candidate.

Character is not the only factor to consider, however. The declared policies of a candidate, and of a candidate's party (Democrat or Republican) give a good indication of what the candidate will do if elected. In this year's election, there is a vast difference between the policies of the two parties and their candidates. The Democrats have moved further to the left, in the direction of a highly government-regulated, oppressive, anti-Christian, quasi-socialist country, than we have ever seen in our history. Is there no level of harmful policies that a party

could advocate that would cause you to rise up and do what you could to stop them?

If you want to know what government under Democratic control would look like, I urge you to watch the kangaroo-court behavior of the Democratic majority when Attorney General William Barr [appeared](#) before the House Judiciary Committee on July 28, 2020 (watch especially the last 45 minutes).

## **7. What will Trump do in a second term?**

You say, “I fear the only thing that has kept Trump in check is the fact that he had to run for a second term. I’m afraid of what he will do if he no longer has that check to stop his more egregious actions.” You also say, “What happens if he abandons evangelicals because they are no longer necessary? What policy will he pursue... What will stop him from making immoral decisions that will reflect back on the evangelicals who elected him?” And you say, “What if he no longer has to lay aside his natural tendencies for the sake of political expediency?”

I see this also as unfounded speculation. If the president in a second term begins to betray the policies and promises that he campaigned on, he will quickly erode his political support in Congress and in the nation as a whole, and for the remainder of his term he will be able to accomplish very little. (Such loss of political support happened to Richard Nixon after the 1972 election, which he had won in a huge landslide, but then the country turned against him because of the Watergate scandal and he resigned from office in 1974. It also happened after President Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory in the 1964 election, when in 1966-68 the political mood of the nation turned against the Vietnam War and against Johnson so decisively that he decided not to run for election in 1968.)

Your earlier predictions about damage Trump would do (if elected) have not been very accurate. I remember that, after the election in November 2016, you told me that you thought Trump was going to ruin the economy, ruin our relationship with other nations, and weaken NATO. In fact, we have a much stronger economy (except for the setback of the COVID-19 pandemic), a strengthened NATO with several European nations finally boosting their defense budgets, improved new trade deals with Mexico, Canada, and China, and good relationships with many other nations.

What will Trump do in a second term? The best basis for predicting his conduct in a second term is his conduct for the past four years. If in a second term Donald Trump acts in the way he has acted in his first term, this will bring a continued strong economy, a strengthened military, better trade terms with other nations, a secure border, more originalist judges, stronger protections for unborn children, strong employment and wage growth, greater energy independence, greater school choice, more safety in inner cities, protection of religious freedoms, and greater liberty for Americans in general.

#### **8. The strategy of the political left is increasingly to avoid policy discussions and focus on *ad hominem* arguments**

It has seemed to me recently that the strategy of the political left has been to deemphasize policy arguments (where their progressive policies cannot prevail in elections) and to focus their efforts on attacks *against the person* they are running against. To put it in simple terms, many prominent Democrats have shifted from arguing, “The Republican candidate has bad policies” to arguing, “The Republican candidate is a bad person.” (And even, “If you support Trump you are a bad person” – which stifles healthy political discussion.)

This approach has been helped by a shamefully biased mainstream media including the New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, NBC, CBS, and ABC. I receive a newsfeed each morning from the New York Times and the Washington Post, and their blatantly biased reporting reveals a hostility toward President Trump unlike anything I’ve seen regarding any other political leader in my lifetime.

Therefore it does not surprise me if, after 3 and a half years of listening to this constant character assassination by the dominant media forces in the country, many people distrust Donald Trump. His flaws, many of which are evident in what he says and what he tweets, provide a pretext for much more serious allegations of character deficiencies. But I don’t think that those people in the general population of the United States who hate Donald Trump are basing their reaction to him on accurate information.

I have some concern that your email to me, by avoiding policy issues and focusing only on criticism of Trump’s character, seemed to follow a similar pattern

of exclusively attacking the person and avoiding any interaction regarding policies.

## **9. The source of divisiveness in the country**

I will admit that there is an unhealthy level of political division and hostility in this country today. I will also admit that President Trump bears some measure of responsibility for this because of his habit of insulting his opponents and calling them derogatory names.

But I think a far larger portion of the responsibility for this polarization lies with the Democrats and their supporters. I already wrote about this in my December 30 column at Townhall.com:

*It is the political Left, not conservatives, who have rendered themselves “the Resistance” and have continued to do everything they can to prevent the Trump administration from even functioning.*

*I have no objection to both parties making their best arguments in the public square and attempting to persuade others of their viewpoint. This is essential for a healthy democracy. But it is quite another thing to “resist” the legitimate government through violence and intimidation.*

*It is not conservatives but the political Left that supports sanctuary cities (hindering enforcement of immigration laws rather than seeking to change the laws through the political process). It is the political Left that has instigated shouting at Trump administration officials and their friends until they are driven out of restaurants and their families are terrified in their own homes. It is the political Left that has repeatedly disrupted congressional hearings with shouted protests. It is the political Left that has abandoned established procedural rules and precedents, fair play, and due process in congressional hearings. It is the political Left that has organized mass protests to prevent conservative speakers from even being heard on university campuses. It is the political Left that has attacked innocent people and made thousands of conservatives (including me) afraid to say they support Trump, or wear a MAGA hat, or put a Trump bumper sticker on their car. These actions do not belong in a healthy society, for they are not part of acceptable political opposition, but are characteristics of the Resistance.*

*Yet the New Testament tells us, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (Romans 13:1).*

It seems to me that these actions, driven by an apparent hatred of Donald Trump, are primarily responsible for our toxic political culture.

### **10. The label "evangelical."**

Over 80% of white evangelical voters supported Donald Trump not because they liked him as a person but because they favored most or all of these policies:

- originalist judges,
- pro-life policies,
- a stronger military,
- a free-market economic system,
- lower taxes,
- fewer government regulations,
- strong support for Israel,
- clearheaded recognition of the economic, military, and information threat of China
- a high value placed on human freedom,
- personal accountability for committing crimes,
- good jobs and school choice as the best way to help the poor,
- a strong border wall and a secure border, followed by a comprehensive reform of our immigration system,
- careful extraction and clean use of carbon-based fuels (coal, oil, natural gas),
- freedom of conscience (government should not force Christians to use their artistic skills to convey a message of approval of same-sex marriage or to use their

medical skills to perform an abortion, or to use their pharmacies as the distribution point for drugs that cause abortion),

- racial inequalities in income and quality of education should primarily be solved by

- greater availability of tax-supported school choice in low-income neighborhoods,

- economic growth resulting in more and better jobs, and

- an increase in safety through an increase in police presence in high crime neighborhoods

- medical marijuana should be allowed (with a prescription from a doctor) but recreational marijuana should be prohibited, and

- restrooms, locker rooms, and single-gender sports teams should be restricted to people of one biological sex or the other.

On the other hand, I fail to see how an evangelical Christian who believes in the moral values of the Bible could support the increasingly far-left Democratic Party. How could Christian in good conscience support a party that promotes laws and policies that

- allow abortion up to the moment of birth,

- authorize the use of our tax money to pay for abortions and gender reassignment surgery,

- cripple our economy with ever-increasing government control and taxes,

- further cripple the economy with expensive Green New Deal energy regulations,

- increase unemployment,

- weaken our military in the face of increased aggressiveness by China,

- promote a Jimmy Carter-like foreign policy of appeasement,

- abandon Israel to fend for itself,

- nullify the Senate filibuster rule (both Obama and Biden have recently spoken about this) so that all legislation can be passed with only 50 senators plus the vice president casting the tie-breaking vote,
- support the rising influence of judges who are not constrained by the original meaning of the words of the Constitution or of the laws, perhaps even adding six additional seats to the Supreme Court in order to be able to give the court a new 10-5 majority of such justices (this could be done with control of both the House, the Senate, and the presidency)
- grant statehood to both Washington DC and Puerto Rico, thus adding four more Democrats to the U.S. Senate (I have heard three US senators already predict that the Democrats would do this if they had the votes)
- support draconian laws that compel an artistic professional or a professional counselor to affirm the validity of same-sex marriage even when that is contrary to the professional person's conscience,
- reinstate the Obama-era guidelines that required schools to allow biological males who claim to be transgender females to use girls' bathrooms, locker rooms, and showers (the guidelines were canceled by Trump),
- allow biological males to compete in women's sports, setting new statewide records in women's track events and other sports
- pass multiple new, extremely strict green energy laws that will massively increase energy costs and therefore will also increase the cost of everything that is made or transported with the use of energy,
- seek to defund the police (to be precise, Biden has said he favors "redirecting" some police funding to other programs, which is a partial "defunding" of police, which will lead predictably to a substantial increase in crime),
- use violence and intimidation to nullify freedom of speech (in practice) for those who disagree with them politically,
- support open borders and sanctuary cities in defiance of the law, and that
- promote a complete federal government takeover of our healthcare system.

It is not the fault of evangelical Christians that Republican party policies have increasingly favored policies consistent with Christian values, while Democratic Party policies have increasingly strayed from Christian values (this happened initially and most notably over the issue of abortion rights but then it spread to many other policies). Since that has happened, it seems to me that evangelicals face an easy choice of which party to support. (In fact, many of the policies favored in the 2016 Republican Party platform are the same as those advocated in my book, *Politics According to the Bible*.)

Because of this wide gap between Republicans and Democrats on values and policies, I expect that President Trump will get an even higher percentage of the evangelical vote in this election. I have spoken with a number of people who did not vote for Trump in 2016 but who will vote for him in 2020. I have not met anyone who voted for him in 2016 but will not vote for him in 2020.

You write that, because of evangelical support for Trump, many of your friends “most likely will never enter church again.” But I wonder if that’s because of Trump or because of the policies he represents. Would they have had the same reaction if Mike Pence had been elected president and had supported the same policies that President Trump has supported? Then the problem is not Trump but the policies he supports.

### **11. Risking my reputation as an evangelical professor of theology**

You say that if I write another article in defense of Trump, “You will be tarnishing your theological legacy for the sake of a man who does not deserve it.”

I’m deeply aware that God has given me a positive reputation in much of the evangelical world, and I count that reputation as a stewardship from God. I’m deeply aware of the responsibility that comes with that stewardship. “It is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2).

But I have been thinking that God might want me to use whatever influence I have to help the country move in the right direction politically. When I think of the thousands of Americans who gave their lives to protect this country, it is a small thing to risk my “reputation.” In addition, supporting Trump by writing additional articles could cut both ways – it could improve my reputation with some people as well as damage it with others. Who knows? In any case, I don’t

want to stand before God at the Last Day and have him ask why I did not use my reputation and my writing ability (that he gave me) to influence the United States for good when it was at a decisive turning point in history, and I would have to say, “But I was trying to protect my reputation.”

As far as I know, I have not in my lifetime backed away from advocating an unpopular position simply to protect my reputation. On subjects like spiritual gifts, the roles of men and women in marriage and the church, the defense of the Vineyard movement, accuracy of gender language in Bible translations, the superiority of essentially literal Bible translations, opposition to theistic evolution, and support of Reformed theology, I have advocated positions that were in many circles unpopular but that seemed to me to be faithful to Scripture. I don’t want to stop doing that now.

## **12. The need for greater civility in political discussions**

Democracy functions best when people who have different political viewpoints say to others who disagree with them, “I disagree with you, but I respect your right to reach a different decision.”

But that is not what has been happening. Instead of showing mutual respect, anti-Trump individuals have labeled political conservatives *as an entire group* as “haters,” “deplorables,” “fascists,” and “racists.” In some cases, they have engaged in intimidation, bullying, and even violence. Responsible conservative speakers are regularly prevented from speaking on university campuses. This is not “the wisdom from above” that James mentions (James 3:17). This is destructive to the nation, and it threatens the spirit of one of our most cherished freedoms, the freedom of speech. Yet I know of no Democratic leader who has called on his or her supporters to stop this violence and intimidation.

In a democracy that is functioning well, family members, friends, and neighbors should be able to disagree about their viewpoints regarding political candidates (including Trump) without damaging the personal relationships. This may be difficult at first, but we should recognize that it was much more difficult in the past, as in the aftermath of the American Civil War. Abraham Lincoln at that time wisely encouraged the nation, “With malice toward none, with charity

toward all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds ....”

We as a nation are facing many crucial political decisions. We need God's wisdom, which will come about through reasoned discussions such as represented in your two thoughtful emails, and, I hope, in my response to your thoughts. “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17).

Respectfully, and with appreciation for your friendship,

Wayne

*Wayne Grudem, is Distinguished Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Phoenix Seminary in Arizona. The views expressed in this article represent the views of the author and should not be understood to represent the position of Phoenix Seminary.*