

# LOCATING JESUS WITH WISDOM: PREACHING AMID POLITICAL INTENSITY

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But the servant of Christ, whatever his method be, is to perform his whole ministry. . . .  
Wisely, framing all his doctrines, exhortations, and especially his reproofs,  
in such a manner as may be most likely to prevail; shewing all due respect to each man's person and place,  
and not mixing his own passion or bitterness.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

“We got to get weapons ready. We got to fight against the evil threatening our country. For the sake of God and our kids we got no choice.”

Fear and fire shone within this man's eyes. He sat at a table with fellow Christian leaders. The pastor had asked that I speak to their leadership team about how to follow Jesus in our political moment. It was slowly dawning upon me that by “weapons,” this brother meant physical ones not spiritual.

“Can you describe the evil that threatens us?” I asked.

“The Democrats. The whole ungodly lot of em. We're fighting for the soul of our nation and we better wake up before it's too late for our families. War is coming. This fight is about God.”

His friends shifted in their seats, pained looks in the eyes.

“Help Lord,” I silently prayed.

“I wonder. Would you be willing to talk about Jesus with me?”

At that, a second leader at the table interrupted.

“I don't agree with everything my friend is saying. He knows that. We've talked about this. But we don't need Sunday School answers

here. What do you say about critical race theory? What do you say about abortion? What do you say about gay marriage? What about our borders, the evil and corruption of democrats taking all our values from us?”

I paused.

*Stay slow*, I thought to myself. A scene from an old movie came to mind. Neo, slow motion in the matrix, dipping this shoulder this way then that way, letting bullets fly on by.

“These questions matter so much, don't they?” I said. “As Christians we need to pay a great deal of attention to them and to other questions too. But what I'm asking is would you be willing to talk about Jesus with me?”

“Look at you just sitting there! What would have to happen for you to find your courage and get into this fight?” the first man said.

I paused. I didn't like the implication of my being weak or cowardly. I spoke silent prayers again and thought of Jesus telling parables. The only thing coming to mind was a pastoral care story.

“Not long ago,” I said, “a member of our church felt terrified to go out at night by herself. She'd never felt this way before. She felt it most when her husband traveled, when she took out the garbage along their long driveway. Where she lives is among the safest

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<sup>1</sup> “Of the Preaching of the Word,” in *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (Edinburgh: 1645) [http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_standards/index.html?mainframe=/documents/wcf\\_standards/p369-direct\\_pub\\_worship.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_standards/index.html?mainframe=/documents/wcf_standards/p369-direct_pub_worship.html)

neighborhoods in our city. What do you imagine brought about this new experience of fear? Something in her past?

As we talked, it turns out she'd been binge-watching a show called *The Walking Dead* about relentless zombies attacking human beings. The story being told on the screen, when binged, became a habit, a way of seeing her world. It made her feel as if her neighborhood was as dangerous as the one on the screen.

If in God's name, I need the kind of courage you ask of me, and to be honest this conversation right now takes some courage, I want to know that what frightens me is real and not just what I'm imagining because of the images and stories on the screens I'm watching.

Would you agree that it might ease her mind if she spent more time with her actual neighbors than these narrow and virtual ones on the zombie show?"

All was quiet.

"When I ask, 'can we talk about Jesus,' I'm asking what I assume we'd each want most. To be present with the living Jesus. To know his word and way regarding the questions pressing us. You love him right?"

The first man hesitantly nodded as others said "yes."

"Me too," I said. "He knit us together as brothers. Let's talk about him. Find our way with him."

Perhaps this scene is more intense than many of us who preach and teach and speak with others about Jesus, might encounter. But it helps us illustrate the two points I want to make with you to help equip you to speak of Jesus in our polarizing political environments.

**Point 1:** When you prepare your message, explicitly locate Jesus as the Bible presents him.

**Point 2:** When you communicate your message, utilize a wisdom approach.

These two paths will not keep us from being criticized, but they will enable us to bring gospel clarity those we pastorally care for who are confused, agitated, unsettled or misguided.

## **Locate Jesus as the Bible Presents Him**

Our first task is to locate Jesus as the Bible presents him.

### **Why Prepare This Way?**

Followers of Jesus can mistakenly follow "ἄλλον Ἰησοῦν," *another Jesus* (2 Cor. 11:3-4), whom the apostles neither preached nor recognize. "Another Jesus" refers to a different interpretation of Jesus that is not congruent with the facts of Jesus' life and death."<sup>2</sup>

Paul carries on what Jesus taught.

*Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah,' and they will deceive many (Matt. 24:4-5; Mk. 13:21-22)*

People are tempted to edit Jesus. By "edit," I mean a process of subtly erasing those aspects of Jesus that one dislikes and then actively photo-shopping into Jesus's picture, things one wishes were true of him.<sup>3</sup>

Editing Jesus like this began as soon as Jesus began his public ministry. If you, "googled," Jesus, during his public ministry, you would have encountered conflicting narrations about him.

- "He is out of his mind" (Mark 3:20)

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<sup>2</sup> D.E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 464.

<sup>3</sup> Missiologists use the term syncretism to describe the "editing" I have in mind.

- “He is possessed by Beelzebul... by the prince he demons he casts out demons” (Mark 3:22)
- “He has an unclean spirit” (Mark 3:30)
- Jesus is “John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet” (Mark 8:28)
- Jesus is “A glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34)
- Jesus is “A liar” (John 8:13), “A Samaritan” (John 8:48)
- Jesus is “Not from God, unlawful” (John 9:16)
- “He has a demon, he is insane, why do you listen to him?” (John 10:20)
- “He is evil” (John 18:30)
- Jesus is “The Christ” (Mark 8:29)

The task of early Christian communicators to detect edits to Jesus remains our task too. Because the temptation to recreate a “not-who-the-apostles-preached” Jesus, continues to this day.<sup>4</sup>

Political polarities incentivize editing Jesus.

## How Do We Prepare This Way?

First, remember the original hearers of Jesus and notice resonances with our tendencies today.

- Everyday people
- Pharisees: Bible believers who loved their nation and wanted it returned to God

- Sadducees: Educated religious leaders who doubt most of the Bible and the supernatural but who want moral reform for their nation.
- Zealots: Believed that violence in God’s name would honor God and overcome their nation’s enemies.
- Essenes: The monks of their day—cloistered to preserve a religious way of life and to stay unstained from the world.
- Herodians: Jewish politicians supporting Herod and partnering politically to advance his and their interests.
- Samaritans: Believers in God at enmity with Jewish people
- Gentiles: Polytheists, Romans who allowed various beliefs as long as one worshipped the state and emperor. They were oppressors of Jewish People (and many others).<sup>5</sup>

Sounds more familiar than we’d expect, doesn’t it? When it came to each of these points of view, Jesus was an equal opportunity commender, offender, and inviter. He could welcome any of them but differed with each of them.

Second, many of us have opinions and assumptions regarding politics and have never given thought to how Jesus as the Bible presents him, addresses them. We don’t want less than Paul or the Prophets (or the entirety of God’s word), we simply want to make sure we’ve heard from the One both Paul and the Prophets (and all of Scriptures) hallows and points us to.

<sup>4</sup> “Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image . . . the American Jesus has been something of a chameleon.” Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 7-8. See also, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (Yale University Press, 1985), Robert Hudson, *Seeing Jesus: Visionary Encounters from the First Century to the Present* (Broadleaf Books, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> For a concise summary of Jesus’ original hearers, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus, and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (B&H Academic, 2009), 29-57. For fuller treatments, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1993) or William A. Simmons, *Peoples of the New Testament World: An Illustrated Guide* (Hendrickson, 2008).

In this light, let searching the gospels designate your first task in preparation.

## **What Difference Will Preparing This Way Make?**

Let's say you want to think through assumptions and questions about "God and Country." Before you turn to Romans 13 or crack open Augustine, first open the search engine to your favorite Bible translation, filter your search to the Gospels and type in words like, "nation, country, or king." (Remember, you'll want to read Romans 13. You'll be helped by Augustine. But start your preparation explicitly with what Jesus says and does).

As you discover what Jesus says about nation, country, and king, perhaps a new question begins to dawn on you. Can a follower of Jesus be a patriot? Is there a difference between patriotism and what we tend to call nationalism?

In response, type in additional words like "patriot and nationalistic" and search the Gospels. You find nothing there, but you remember from your expanded search on "nation, country, and king" that Peter used two words in one of his sermons to communicate how he changed his political views (Acts 10:34-43). The words were "favoritism and partiality." So, you start the process again, searching what the Gospels say about these two things and then expanding to the rest of the New Testament, and so on.

As you read and prayerfully study these passages, you discover another word you've always known but never applied to our own political climate. That word is "zealot." So, you search that word in the Gospels, eventually adding similar words like "sword," and "weapons."

This process I'm describing doesn't all happen at once but along the way, day by day, week by week, month by month.

But as you've begun to meditate upon how Jesus and his earliest followers relate to ideas

like God, country, nation, favoritism, partiality, swords, weapons, and zealotry I'll tell you this. You'll being to notice at least two important things.

1. Very few political voices on either side of the aisle talk like Jesus and his earliest followers. (That was true then, too).
2. Some conservative and progressive voices seem to be editing Jesus.

A question arises. It's been bugging me. Why is it that in our opening scene, my brothers in Christ suspected me of being progressive when I asked if we could talk about Jesus?

Did they forget that variations of conservatism and progressivism exist in most every generation, among most people and countries, and that these ideologies can exist apart from Christianity?

Or is it that without realizing it they heard me through a political rather than a biblical frame? After all, anyone looking at things biblically would think it the first, sanest, and most important thing two Christians could do, to look immediately to Jesus together, when facing a bewildering or frightening urgency.

Another question surfaces. Is it possible that there are politically conservative and politically progressive versions of Jesus that the apostles didn't preach and wouldn't recognize?

Yes.

## **Discerning Political Versions of Jesus**

One reason I suspect that political versions of Jesus exist is this. How a republican or a democrat can hear Jesus's words or Biblical verses on a preacher's lips.

If I quote words right there in the biblical text such as "foreigner, immigrant, love, justice, gentleness, kindness, the poor, the nations, of God as being like a woman who

searches for a coin, or that the sin of murder includes both unborn and born people, many republican hearers are on alert, I'm suspected of being progressive. Even though the Bible originated these sentences long before either of us or American politics existed. A bible believing Christian knows that God, not progressives, invented love. But when political lenses are beginning to interpret the Bible rather than the other way round, it feels to them as if I'm more solid if I don't talk about love. Even though they know and believe that love is the sum of God's law.

Likewise, if I quote words from the text like "work, sin, money, truth, God the Father, the cross, saved, bodily resurrection, or that the sin of murder includes both unborn and born people, many progressive hearers go on high alert and assume I'm a republican. Even though I'm pointing to Jesus's words or the Biblical verse, it seems as though republicans invented such talk, rather than the historic text existing long before American politics were thought of.

There's more to say here but one way to quickly sketch the signs that a political edit of Jesus is taking place is to think about John 3:16.

A politically progressive version of Jesus prizes the first part of Jesus's teaching, but feels uncomfortable, dislikes, and disbelieves the last part of Jesus's teaching.

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*  
(John 3:16)

This version of Jesus prizes the love ethic of Jesus but finds his view of truth too narrow, and his view of himself, too exclusive. This version of Jesus prizes Jesus in the fullness of his humanity but feels uncomfortable with Jesus as God.

When one who described herself as a "liberal Christian" interviewed atheist Christopher Hitchens regarding his book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. The interviewer explained to Christopher that she doesn't take the stories of the Bible literally; that she doesn't believe in the atonement, the teaching that Jesus died for our sins, nor the resurrection of Jesus, unless we see it as a metaphor that can inspire our faith. The atheist responded:

I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian . . . Paul says, very clearly, that if it is not true that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then we the Christians are of all people the most unhappy."<sup>6</sup>

Christopher highlighted a progressive edit, a version of Jesus that differs from the one Jesus's apostles preached.

In contrast, a politically conservative version of Jesus can prize the last part of Jesus's teaching but can feel uneasy about Jesus's love ethic being too broad.

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*  
(John 3:16)

This version of Jesus tends to highly prize the deity of Jesus but can struggle with Jesus in the fullness of his humanity. To locate Jesus as the Bible presents him, we'll want to remind them who Jesus is as a human being. We can say something like:

Let's pause and remind ourselves who Jesus is as he says these words. Jesus is Jewish, single, celibate, and poor. He lives and speaks these words as a minority beneath the oppressive occupation of

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/news-and-city-life/2009/12/christopher-hitchens>

Rome, with very few rights afforded him. Jesus is neither American nor European and in the fullness of his humanity he doesn't speak English. He is a foreigner to us. His life and his words have been translated into our language.

Add to this that most Christian and other-than-Christian visitors who are younger feel wore out and turned off by Jesus followers whose talking points sound no different from the non-Christian members of the political party they prize, it's time to make our second point.

Trying to communicate Jesus as the Bible presents him into a heightened context of political alert, requires wisdom.

## A Wisdom Lens

By a "wisdom way of communicating," I mean:

- *Theologically*<sup>7</sup>: Jesus wonderfully fulfills the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king, but also the biblical sage. Jesus is one greater than Solomon (Matt. 12:42), the fulfillment of wisdom, and wisdom itself (I Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3).<sup>8</sup>
- *Homiletically*: This means the paradigm for preachers isn't just biblical prophets but also biblical sages.<sup>9</sup> Jesus describes

his communicators as "prophets *and wise men* and scribes" (Matt. 23:34, italics mine).<sup>10</sup>

- *Biblically*: Like the biblical sages who foreshadow Jesus, he too, preaches like a sage. For the bulk of his ministry, Jesus reserves his prophetic "Woe to you!" (Matt. 23) not for everyday sinful people like the woman at the well, a tax collector, a Roman soldier, or even Peter who unwittingly gave voice to Satan. But for Pharisees who after nearly three years of hardening toward him were scheming to kill him in God's name.
- *Stylistically*: The wise reach for the will of their listeners as with a flashlight. Flash a light directly into the eyes of a person whose dark path you want to illumine and you'll do the opposite of what you intend. The light directly shone into the eyes blinds the one you want to help and robs them of the ability to see the path you want them to see. In the dark, one must light up the path, not the person, if they are to see where to walk.

To put it another way. If you want the person to see themselves with clarity in the dark, you start the flashlight low and slow adjacent to their feet, and then gradually and hospitably you raise the light up to their chest

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<sup>7</sup> "Therefore, that faith may find in Christ a solid ground of salvation, and so rest in him, we must set out with this principle, that the office which he received from the Father consists of three parts. For he was appointed both Prophet, King, and Priest." John Calvin, *Calvin's Institutes*, chapter 15.

<sup>8</sup> "Whereas the prophetic aspect of Jesus' teaching usually receives its due recognition, there is a tendency to overlook and underestimate the role of Jesus as a sage." Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 2. "We forget the saying of Jeremiah: 'The law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet' (Jer. 18:18). We find these—all these styles—in Christ." Amos N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 86.

<sup>9</sup> "You are no doubt all aware that the New Testament minister corresponds not at all to the Old Testament *priest*, but in important respects to the Old Testament *prophet*." John Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1876), 10. For Broadus, Ecclesiastes might introduce preachers to a "certain class of sermons," but says nothing more and prefers the prophetic paradigm for preachers. Likewise Edwin Dargin, looks to Proverbs and the preacher of Ecclesiastes for "hints" regarding "the preparation of . . . religious teachers," but goes no further, instead prioritizing the prophet, *The Art of Preaching*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Also see, Paul: Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. (Col. 1:28)

just below their chin, so they can see themselves.

The wise call this “a soft answer that breaks a bone” (Prov. 25:15). The approach is gentle but the impact palpable.

For example, to draw out the will of his disciples, Jesus first says, “who do *people* say that I am?” He first shines the light out there in the lives of others. In response, his disciples look out there at others and say what they see and hear. Then, after a pause, it’s as if Jesus slowly moves the shining flashlight off of others toward them, as if he raises it with hospitable pace from their feet up to their chests, so that they can now see his eyes and he can see theirs. Now his directness is given in a question. “Who do you say that I am?” (Lk. 9:18-20).

***For the wise, an intentional confrontation of our will begins only after a gentle but intentional invitation to step into the shoes of others.***

Like Nathan the wise prophet with David, or Jesus with the man to whom he told the “good Samaritan” story, the wise have us contemplate a scene, or bit of poetry, so that we can first think and feel about others, without defensiveness. Then the wise bring the meaning of what we see and hear out there with others, into a palpable confrontation with our own role and condition of heart.

“Which one proved to be the neighbor?” Jesus asks.

Though gently asked on the heels of an intriguing story, a Jewish man must now answer Jesus’s question by saying the word “Samaritan” in public and with regard, two things the Jewish man would never want to do (Lk. 10:25-37) and neither would any of his Jewish employers, family members or friends, want this spoken upon his lips. But wisely, gently, confrontatively, Jesus has called for it.

According to wisdom, a soft answer doesn’t mean weak or frightened. Soft here means indirect. Jesus uses a question, a pause, a story, as he gives hospitable time and room for the listener to think, feel, imagine, and catch up to the confronting question that awaits them. Such wisdom is prophetic. But it does not take up the mantle of Woe the prophet hollers. Not yet. Not for a long while. Jesus can say Woe to You! And we must be able to do so as well. But this isn’t his default approach and we must learn to follow him in this.

- *A flashlight-use of truth directly into the eyes that blinds us into squinting:*  
Slow to listen! Quick to speak! Quick to vent anger!
- *A flashlight-use indirectly below the eyes that helps us see:*  
Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. (James 1:19)

In the scene of leaders that began this conversation, perhaps now you notice my imperfect attempt to ask questions, listen, pause, invite, tell a story, and commend what I could. This soft approach was used not to avoid getting to questions that needed answering, but used so that we could have a real chance at doing so.

***Merely beaming the flashlight of truth into the eyes of someone who is doing the same with you, renders both of us unable to see.***

Our goal is not to “win” but to locate Jesus together and humbling ourselves to follow what Jesus says, pays for and restores regarding the things that puzzle us.

## ***Taking a Wisdom Step as a Gospel Communicator***

There’s a great more to say here and biblical resources for further study about sage

preaching and teaching are available to you.<sup>11</sup> But for our purpose, let's summarize Jesus's wisdom approach to preaching and teaching by noting his refrain within his Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard it said but I say to you." I commend Jesus's wiser paradigm to you as you think about how to preach and teach in our political moment (and as you consider how it is Jesus most often approaches you).

- *You have heard IT said*: Jesus has a subject, theme, or big idea he intends to talk about
- **YOU HAVE HEARD it SAID**: Jesus accounts for what those listening to him have already heard said and seen done regarding the subject Jesus is talking about. Jesus understands and accurately names the thoughts of our neighbors without caricature. He takes their previous experience seriously.
- *You have heard it said BUT*: amid what he is able to commend, there is nonetheless something incomplete or mistaken, misguided, or wrongheaded, in what people have heard said or seen done about the "it" Jesus addresses.
- *You have heard it said but I SAY TO YOU*: Jesus now speaks and lives into what is incomplete, mistaken, or wrong so as to recover what is wise and true about how to respond to the "it" he is talking about.

- How do we know this is Jesus's wisdom way? Because we are reading these words in the Bible which is our authority.

Now imagine we are to speak about politics, either through a sermon series, or a particular application in a message. Politics becomes the "it" we propose to talk about, the subject or big idea, we want to address.

Once we state this, our next wisdom move, is to enable our hearers to listen and understand what those around them are saying (and to recognize their own voices within this too). Before we declare, "I Say to You," we must wisely embody what it means to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. We are listening-preachers. We do not unwisely speak before we've first listened to others and understood them, because to do so, "is folly and shame" (Prov. 18:13).

We also commend anything we can in what we've heard, having listened to more than one voice or side, and locating truth regardless of who says it.<sup>12</sup> This is because the wise know,

*The first to state his case seems right until another comes and cross-examines him (Prov. 18:17-18).*

How is it that Jesus could quote what people were saying and doing unless in the fulness of his humanity he was paying attention to them? He did not shut off listening to voices that differed with him. By

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<sup>11</sup> Watch Zack Eswine, *Biblical Foundations for Sage Preaching & Teaching* and Read the accompanying E-book for this three video course entitled, *You Have Heard it Said But I Say to You* <https://www.sagechristianity.com/preaching-and-teaching-resources> Also, Read "Part 2: Explore Biblical Models for a Post-Everything World" in Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons that Connect with Our Culture* (Baker, 2008), 97-180. Or join a Winter/Spring cohort with me and Mark Ryan exploring *The Wiser Voice of a Leader* <https://www.sagechristianity.com/sage-leadership-cohorts>

<sup>12</sup> In his Sermon on the Mount for example, notice how Jesus acknowledges that even those who are evil experience the goodness of God's creation goods in their lives (Matt. 5:45) and Jesus recognizes the genuine love that people do possess while exposing what remains lacking. Instead of mischaracterizing them by saying "they don't love in all things therefore they never love and have no love." (Matt. 5:46). Also note that Jesus refers to religious leaders who believe the Bible as "hypocrites" within his sermon and yet, when Jesus speaks of the "Gentiles" and what is missing in their way of teaching and life, Jesus does not call them hypocrites. They are genuine and sincere in their mistaken beliefs, not putting on a God-mask to misuse others. Compare



quoting the talk and ways of his cultural neighbors, Jesus continues the wisdom practice of allowing his listeners to hear the audio of their lives.<sup>13</sup>

Notice too that when Jesus quotes these cultural voices in his teaching he doesn't use a mocking voice. Nor does he edit what he quotes to make his neighbors' perspectives sound worse or better than they are. When his listeners hear Jesus quote their world, they recognize it as accurate to what they've thought, said, or heard.<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind, we transition from the "it" (a subject such as Christianity and Politics) to the "You've Heard Said, But."

***We make a cultural connection for the purpose of inviting our listeners to make a biblical redirection.***

Think of the many things you and your listeners have heard said. Things like, "you can't be a Christian and vote Democrat" (or visa versa), or "abortion is the most important issue in God's eyes," or "If you affirm one thing about the other side you've endorsed everything about them."

Our goal is to submit these ways of thought to the Gospels, and then to the entirety of the Scriptures to see what an unedited Jesus would make of them.

## **Two Examples: "You've Heard it Said"**

Imagine, first that you want to interact with what people hear said about history

judging us. "You don't want to be on the wrong side of history." You might say something like this.

As we look at this question of politics we don't, (as people everywhere tell us), want to find ourselves on the wrong side of history. At its best this saying morally energizes and compels us. It rouses our desire for what is true, good and just to flourish. We want to do the right and wise thing. We want to resist and choose the wrong thing in our cultural moment.

But while this sentiment motivates some of us it unsettles others of us and makes us anxious. What if I get it wrong? What if I make a mistake? What if at the end of it all for all my effort I'm left out and separated, placed on the wrong side of history, forever unable to get to the other side, where all the righteous are?

May I encourage you with a thought? For those who follow Jesus, we share in this hunger and thirst for righteousness. We too want to choose what is good, true, and just. But, may I remind you that according to Jesus, it isn't history that will judge us, God will? According to Jesus, none of us at the end of all things will stand before history. History doesn't have that kind of power. After all, isn't history in this sense, just us talking about ourselves, judging ourselves?

It won't be history that measures us and separates us into the righteous on this side and the unrighteous on that side. Jesus will do the separating to one side or the other. All of us, at the end of all things, will end up on this

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<sup>13</sup> The next time you read Proverbs or Ecclesiastes for example, notice the quotation marks—the way the wise engage what neighbors say For more on how the wise listen to and quote their neighbors see Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons that Connect with our Culture* (Baker, 2008), 156-162.

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, notice how Paul quotes his cultural neighbors' perspectives for example in Acts 17 or Titus 1. Notice also that Paul assumes that Christians are listening-talkers, those who do not speak until they first accurately understand. "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, *so that you may know how you should answer each person*" (Col. 4:6). OR "No foul language should come from your mouth, *but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear*" (Eph. 4:29) OR "warn those who are idle, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thess. 5:14). To know how to answer each one, to know what is good for building up someone in need, to resist warning the discouraged and weak but comforting and helping them, and to resist impatiently warning the idol, we must first listen and discern who is in front of us and then speak from that place of understanding. Paul practices what the biblical wise taught. "Act wisely," Paul says (Col. 4:5).

or that side of Jesus, not on this or that side of history.

The important question then is what relation do you have with Jesus?

History isn't a person, but Jesus is. Unlike history, the God who knows all things, is just and merciful, full of grace and truth. He knows what we do not. Our actions and motives, circumstances, and challenges, regrets and failures. Your great hope won't be how you are measured by history but how you've been measured up for by Jesus. In the end, and this is great news, it will not be your perfection and righteousness that you stand on, but his!

Or consider a second example. You want to interact with what listeners have heard said about conservative and progressive hope. You try it something like this.

Following Jesus in our politically charged moment can feel confusing. Those of us who lean conservative in our view of things, say our hope is to "make America great again." It's not hard for anyone who loves our country to resonate with this call. The best days are behind us. We want to bring them back again. We cannot help but cherish so much good in our country's history.

Yet those of us who love what the Bible says are given pause. For Biblical wisdom tells us:

*Don't say, "Why were the former days better than these?" since it is not wise of you to ask this. (Ecclesiastes 7:10)*

It feels disorienting, but according to biblical wisdom, it isn't wise to suggest former days were better than the present.

Those of us who lean more progressive, want to respond, "yes, that's right! Our best days are ahead of us! We must let go of the past and strive for the better we've not yet known." Those wanting the best for our

country cannot help but resonate with this dream of future good in light of so much misguided brokenness in our past.

Yet those of us who love what the Bible says are given pause. For Biblical wisdom tells us:

*Don't move an ancient boundary marker that your ancestors set up. (Proverbs 22:28)*

There is wisdom in our past we must not overlook.<sup>15</sup>

Can you begin to feel the rock and a hard place that someone who trusts the Bible begins to find themselves in?

Conservatism underestimates the sins of the past and overestimates the good of the past.

Progressivism underestimates the sins in the future and overestimates the good of the future.

Biblical wisdom knows better. Good and sinful things are behind us and before us. Both beauty and brokenness describes every generation's experience.

But the real problem with both perspectives is that one of them has us looking to the glory of the past while the other has us looking to the glory of the future, but neither seems to believe glory can exist now in the present. It's as if the present is nothing but wreckage and our only hope is to escape the present and either leap back or leap forward.

But don't we who love the Bible hear it saying, "Today! Today if you hear his voice" (Heb. 13:5). We who follow Jesus are grateful for his grace in the past and we entrust ourselves to his grace in the future. But our great hope is that Jesus is alive right now, right here, in this very moment. Our hope isn't to escape this moment but to behold Jesus in it and to look to him to lead us through it. It is in

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<sup>15</sup> The boundary marker refers to lines drawn to maintain just and equitable use of land. Imagine one neighbor changes the fence line that was set, extending his own property to the loss of the other. Wise equitable markings for the sake of neighbors ought not to be easily moved. See <https://www.gotquestions.org/do-not-remove-ancient-landmark.html>

the presence of death's shadowed valley with enemies all around that our Good shepherd prepares a table for us, sits with us, sups with us, and doesn't our cup overflow?!"

You) to the IT we're discussing (e.g., Politics) in light of what we've heard people saying and doing about this IT (e.g., the wrong side of history, or the best is past or future). And we want to do this wisely.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, we want to discover how the biblically unedited Jesus responds (I Say to

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## **A Sample Sermon**

I was reading a very kind gift someone gave to us. The book wonderfully aims to teach children God's wisdom. Each page has a picture with a Biblical proverb showing us that God's little child is helpful, giving, wise, friendly, hard-working, obedient, cheerful, fruitful, thrifty, brave self-controlled, disciplined, diligent, kind content, industrious, responsible, and prayerful.

Then on the last page the book offers God's little child a picture. What would you imagine a trail of biblical proverbs would lead God's little child to? The cross? The empty tomb? No. The last page of the book is the American flag and the pledge of allegiance.

In fact, Jesus isn't mentioned anywhere in the book and every picture along the way shows the little boy carrying an American flag or blowing a flagged trumpet or his dog wearing the American flag too. The proverbs of the Scripture lead God's little child without Jesus to allegiance to America.

We can have at least two responses to this book.

Some of us feel bothered by what appears to be nationalism—using the Bible and God as a means to prioritize and worship one's country.

Others of us want to say, "but wait a minute," isn't it a good thing to cherish one's country? To take pride in one's people?

What are we to make of this? Is there a difference between patriotism and nationalism for a Christian?

## **Jesus & Nation**

To help us gain our bearings, let's begin by looking at how Jesus related to this question.

First, when people listened to Jesus they were perplexed by his impartiality toward people. Everyone around Jesus showed partiality and favoritism to those from their own nation.

The first question by which a Jewish person would measure another human being was, "Are you Jewish?"

A Roman was no different and asked this same first question from the opposite direction. “Are you a Roman citizen?” If you answered, “no” to either question, both would treat you unfavorably.

Perhaps you remember how long it took Peter to extend equality to non-Jewish people. Peter traveled with Jesus three years, saw Jesus rise from the dead, was restored by Jesus, received the Holy Spirit, preached for the conversion of thousands, was imprisoned for his faith, and yet for all that, unless confronted face-to-face by Paul and encountering a supernatural intervention, Peter still refused to consider a Gentile equal with a Jewish person. It would actually take Peter until Acts 10 to step into the house of a Gentile. But listen to Peter testifying to the change Jesus made within him.

Peter said to them, “You know it’s forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner, but God has shown me that I must not call any person impure or unclean . . . Now I truly understand that God doesn’t show favoritism, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (Acts 10:28, 34-35).

Jesus’s unwillingness to show favoritism to someone based on what country and nationality they are, partly explains why Jesus perplexed Jewish religious leaders. Have you ever heard the phrase “God and Country?” The Messiah they expected was a political and military savior who would prioritize their own nation and people in victory over Gentiles and Samaritans.

This political expectation explains why when Jesus fed thousands with loaves and fishes, many wondered if Jesus might be the promised one, instinctively applying their political aspirations to Jesus.

*When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:14-15)*

Over time, seeing that Jesus did not intend to rule politically over their country in victorious opposition to Rome and Samaria, religious leaders actually began to see Jesus as a threat to their national interests. Now this is important for our current question.

*If we let him go on like this . . . the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (John 11:47-48)*

By the time, they accuse Jesus before Pontius Pilate, they cite their own national interests to justify rejecting Jesus.

*They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation, opposing payment of taxes to Caesar, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king . . . Away with him! We have no king but Caesar.” (Luke 23:2; Jn. 19:15)*

And when offered an insurrectionist or Jesus, they chose Barabbas, the insurrectionist.

*They shouted back, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a revolutionary. (John 18:40)*

They preferred one who opposed Rome through violent means for the primacy of their own country, to Jesus whom they viewed as one opposed to the Messianic political hope they longed for.

On this point, among the most telling rumors about Jesus swirling among his own people isn’t just that Jesus is demonic in league with Satan, but that “He is a Samaritan” (Jn. 8:48). Jesus didn’t place his own people first. He was a “sell-out.”

But they were mistaken. Jesus wasn't a Samaritan. Jesus is Jewish as are all his original disciples. He loves his own people and nation. He weeps over them, and longs for their good (Lk. 19:41-44).

And yet, unlike his fellow citizens, the nations are on his mind, as he clears the temple (Matt. 21:13) and commissions his disciples (Matt. 28:19). He makes Samaritans the hero of some of his short stories and treats Samaritans as if they too belonged to the Kingdom of God. Jesus likewise welcomes gentiles, even Roman soldiers, as if they too can belong to God's kingdom.

Let's pause here. What help are we finding to our question about patriotism and nationalism?<sup>16</sup>

Seeing Jesus's posture, could we say that a patriot loves his own country and people, cherishes the best of its history, weeps for her failings, and longs for her flourishing? And yet, doesn't privilege that nation or people as it relates to God or God's kingdom?

When Paul converted to Jesus, for example, Paul's profound and public regard for his own country and people did not abate (Rom. 9:3-4). Paul tells Gentiles and Jewish people, both publicly and honestly about his own sacrificial love for his nation and people.

And yet, changed by Jesus, Paul gives his life as a minister to gentiles, (Eph. 3:8) equally seeking their welfare and good, inviting any from every nation, to receive Jesus's welcome to his table (1 Cor. 9:20-23).

Paul still loves his country and his people. He is a "Hebrew of Hebrews" he says. But he now counts this status as nothing in comparison to knowing and serving Jesus (Phil. 3:4).

The result? Paul who once saw Gentiles unclean and his nation alone pre-eminent, has changed. His first question is no longer, "Which country and people are you from?" Now, regardless of what people one belongs to, Paul's first question is this. "Do you know Jesus?" Paul says:

*From now on, then, we do not know anyone from a worldly perspective . . . if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:16-17)*

Doesn't it seem that to Jesus, nations are fantastic but not first? Fabulous but not favored? It almost seems that instead of saying *God and Country*, those who are changed by the grace and follow Jesus like Paul and Peter, gradually learn to say, *God over Countries*.

It matters to pause here and remember that many Gentiles and Jewish people, in the Roman, Samaritan, and Jewish worlds, hated Jesus's impartial message. Many still do today.

But the earliest Christians went on teaching it. Each of us loves our own God given tribe, tongue, and nation. And yet, every tribe, tongue, and nation bows to Jesus (Phil. 2:10-11; Rev. 7:9).<sup>17</sup>

And because we do away with showing partiality with nations and peoples, Jesus also resisted the temptation to zealotry and taught his followers the same.

Zealotry has to do with using physical weapons to harm people in the name of God and country. Many of Jesus's original disciples struggled to master this temptation. James and John wanted to murder Samaritan people in God's name (Lk. 9:54). Peter cut off a man's ear (Lk. 22:47-51). Paul inflicted physical harm on Jesus's followers for God's honor.

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<sup>16</sup> For a brief and helpful introduction to the problem of nationalism see Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories that Shape Our Lives* (IVP Academic, 2009), 61-78.

<sup>17</sup> One remembers Joshua encountering the Angel of the Lord on Joshua's way to Jericho. "Are you for us or for our enemies," Joshua asks. With sword drawn, the commander of the Lord's army says, "Neither" (Josh. 5:13-14).

Jesus says of zealotry,

*a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God. They will do these things because they haven't known the Father or me (John 16:2-3).*

Jesus's point is plain. Whoever does this kind of violence in God's name reveals by their actions that they do not yet know Jesus or the Father Jesus reveals to us.

Is there hope for those tempted to boldness through zealotry? Yes! Jesus rebuked James and John and they listened to him. Jesus told Peter to put away Peter's sword and Peter listened. Jesus confronted Paul and Paul listened. And Jesus demonstrated this hope by calling a Zealot named Simon, to be one of Jesus's original twelve students.

At this point, we've a startling fact and a startling change.

It is a startling fact to realize that every one of Jesus's original students were nationalists, given to partiality, and many of them were tempted to zealotry.

The startling change? They all began with Jesus this way. But none of them stayed this way.<sup>18</sup>

### **What might this mean for you?**

For some, following Jesus will mean learning to lessen our cynicism about our own nation and people and to cherish the people and place he has given us more than we currently do. God has been at work among our people and in our country. We can give thanks for our place and our history.

For others, following Jesus will mean that we must let go of the inordinate place we've given to our country and people. Our patriotism is giving way to the sin of partiality, God and Country, and temptations to zealotry. The world around us might think in this "God and country" way. But Jesus doesn't.

What if using favoritism and partiality with nations and people are part of what Jesus died to save us from?

To close, can you imagine the wondrous scandal the Lord's supper must have been among those first Christians? Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, a Roman soldier alongside someone from Herod's court. A one-time zealot next to a once-tax collector. Together at one table taking the bread and the cup, together grateful for his body broken and blood shed, together grateful for grace and for each other, together declaring his death until he comes.

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<sup>18</sup> Except perhaps Judas.