

President's Convocation
Gateway Seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention
Dr. Jeff Iorg, President
February 6, 2019

The Evangelical Dilemma

As we begin 2020, we find ourselves in a national political maelstrom. President Trump was impeached by the House of Representatives, has been acquitted by the Senate, and is now running for re-election. Chaos marked the Democratic caucuses in Iowa, Super Tuesday primaries are coming in March, but the Democratic nominee may not be identified until their convention this July. Given the current vitriolic nature of American politics, election chaos will likely continue for the rest of this year with charges, counter-charges, polarizing attack ads, and countless media attempts to sway public opinion and secure votes.

Many evangelicals are confused and stressed about navigating these troubled waters and deciding how to vote in the presidential election. We are not exempt from these questions or pressures at Gateway – and neither are the churches or the communities we serve. My purposes today are to discuss how to conduct ourselves in the midst of this turmoil and propose a framework for deciding how to vote in the 2020 elections.

Evangelicals face a dilemma in deciding which candidate to support in the upcoming presidential election. This division and uncertainty seems to be caused by two perspectives. First, many evangelicals are distrustful of Democratic candidates which seem beholden to the radical wing of their party. Second, many evangelicals have deep-seated concerns about supporting President Trump – for a variety of reasons. They find his leadership style, ethical conduct, and moral standards repugnant. They are embarrassed by his bombastic communication style and lack of presidential presence. Some feel association with him diminishes our moral

authority and undermines our gospel witness. These evangelicals – like Mark Galli in a well-publicized editorial in Christianity Today – have repudiated the President and called for his removal from office.

On the other hand, many evangelicals embrace President Trump and aggressively support him. These include pastors like Robert Jeffress and ministry leaders like Franklin Graham. These leaders typify evangelicals who focus on his policies or positions and gloss over the president's personal shortcomings. They may not like everything about President Trump, but they prefer him with his flaws over candidates running against him. For many evangelicals, these options seem like choosing between the lesser of two evils.

These issues outline the evangelical dilemma. Should we support President Trump because of his policies and despite his flaws? Or, should we reject his leadership and choose someone with character and demeanor more in line with our expectations for leaders? My message today will provide a framework to help you answer those questions.

Now the disclaimers. Gateway Seminary has never taken a position on a secular election and will not do so this year. At the end of this message, I will not tell you who to vote for in the elections later this fall. My thoughts today are an attempt to create a framework for you to think through the issues, not decide them for you. Some of you will be disappointed I do not give you the answer to this evangelical dilemma. Others of you will disagree with my observations and perhaps even be angry with me for addressing these issues. For some of you, my willingness to see nuances in this discussion will be frustrating. You want me to live in the Twitter-verse and give you presumptive conclusions in 280 characters. That's not going to happen.

Instead, let me ask and answer a series of questions to help frame some issues involved in the 2020 election and how to think through them. The first question is this:

Does character matter for leaders?

The answer, for those of us who live in the “ministerial leadership” world, is a resounding “yes.” When Paul described the qualities of pastors and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:6-16), he emphasized character qualities extensively. There is very little mentioned about leadership skills or educational attainment and even less about leadership policies or positions. For ministry leaders, character issues are paramount. We are expected to model moral and ethical behavior – both personally and professionally. We are expected to demonstrate character through behaviors – at home, church, and in the community. For us, the character of leadership (someone even wrote a book by that title) matters. And because it matters so much in our world, we easily and erroneously transpose those expectations on leaders in other fields.

While it is desirable for leaders in every field to demonstrate the character described as essential to pastors and deacons, the Bible does not declare that mandate or establish that standard. In contrast, when biblical Christians had the opportunity to interface with secular leaders of dubious character, they seldom used the opportunity to confront their character deficiencies. One exception was John the Baptist confronting Herod’s immorality by telling him, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (Mark 6:19). Interestingly, Herod did not execute John for confronting him about this sin. He beheaded John to avoid public embarrassment after making a lustful, prideful boast (Mark 6:27). In other words, he beheaded John to enhance his political standing - the same reason politicians make many decisions today.

More commonly, early church leaders used appearances before secular leaders to speak the gospel and advocate for policies that would advance the gospel’s influence. Paul’s prolonged legal battle is a good example (Acts 24-26). Despite his likely frustration with a lengthy imprisonment and legal process that lasted more than two years, he never lashed out at the

secular leaders judging him. He really never offered much of a personal defense either. His focus was on declaring the gospel, not confronting the character of those who had imprisoned him. Paul recognized a higher responsibility in his dealings with political leaders than confronting their personal issues. He kept his focus on the gospel. Even his ultimate legal strategy – appealing to Caesar – was about advancing the gospel to Rome, not his personal vindication or freedom.

Perhaps the best Old Testament example of a person with questionable character who was also a prominent political leader is David. While serving as king, he committed adultery and schemed to have an honorable man abandoned and killed in battle to cover up his sin (2 Samuel 11). It is important to note that while his character failures diminished his leadership effectiveness, they did not cost him his leadership role. David remained king after committing adultery and being complicit in murder. This a good example of behavior by a political leader (who remained in office) that would never be acceptable for a ministerial leader today.

Some Christians erroneously apply David's example to ministerial leadership and are willing to excuse immoral and unethical behavior among ministers. That's an exegetical leap too far. David was a political leader, not a pastoral leader. His grievous sins (yet still remaining king) cannot be used to excuse ministerial malpractice today or forgive heinous behavior by ministry leaders. Ministry leaders are held to a higher standard than political leaders.

One of the reasons some people dislike President Trump is his character flaws. His abusive comments about women, conflicts with business associates, profane communication style, and other issues are well-documented. For many evangelicals, these flaws are too serious to overlook, and consequently determine their unwillingness to support President Trump.

While moral and ethical character qualities are desirable among all leaders, they are clearly mandated in the Bible for ministerial leaders. Not so clearly for political leaders. In a best case scenario political leaders would be high-character persons, but it is not required as it is for ministry leaders. Several recent American presidents have had serious character flaws. Kennedy was a womanizer, Johnson was a power monger, George W. Bush was a recovering alcoholic, and Clinton had a sexual encounter with an intern in the Oval Office. President Trump is not the first president with serious character flaws – nor will he be the last.

I will come back to the issue of character in a few minutes, but for now let's move on to the next question.

Which is more important for political leaders – policy or personality?

The answer in our social media driven world is personality. People want to know and like leaders – even using “like” as a response category on some platforms. Likeability seems to be the essential decision-point for many people. The problem, of course, is media only creates illusions enforcing likeability – the illusion a person creates about their persona, the illusion you really know a person you follow on social media, and the illusion you can judge a person by their number of followers. All of these are illusions, yet we still give allegiance to people who have intriguing personalities as portrayed on social media.

The capacity to influence elections by creating a personality cult is amazing. The essential issues defining a person's electability today seems to be their fundraising ability, personal marketability, telegenic appearance, and chameleon-like capacity to connect to the right demographic groups. Personality matters, like never before, in politics.

President Trump is masterful at using or manipulating (depending on your perspective) these opportunities. He has created a personality cult, driven by his Twitter account, that is both polarizing and magnetizing. The persona he projects repels some people and attracts others. Some people who are put off by his behavior point to President Obama's conduct in contrast. President Obama was – in a phrase – more presidential. He carried himself with a reserved dignity, carefully managed his public appearances to support that perception, and kept himself “above the fray” in the tumultuous world of social media.

Beyond that, returning to the aforementioned role of character, President Obama demonstrated a much higher regard for women, was more transparent in his business dealings, was more circumspect in his use of language, and seems to be a model husband and doting father. His discreet smoking habit was considered his worst vice.

It would be easy to conclude Obama was a better president than Trump because his personality was less grating and his personal style more dignified. But that leads us to consider the second part of this question – the importance of policy positions and policies implemented in evaluating political leaders.

While his personality and character were admirable in many ways, President Obama presided over one of the worst social policy changes in American history. He “evolved” (his words, not mine) on the issue of same-sex marriage. During his presidency, and with his full support, the same-sex marriage policy debacle was facilitated and then enshrined into law. We are about 12 years into this disastrous abandonment of marriage as the foundation of almost every society (for millennia, in every culture and context). By 2050, the global impact of this decision will have reverberated in destructive ways too numerous to detail here. This message is

not about same-sex marriage or its corollary, the legitimization of homosexual behavior, so I will leave those discussions to another day.

For now, however, note the contrast between personality and policy. While many evangelicals prefer the style of Obama over Trump, no Christian who accepts the Bible as the Word of God can evaluate a president positively who facilitated this kind of policy and cultural debacle. So, while I might prefer to have dinner with Mr. Obama it would be difficult to swallow the food because of my heartburn over the damage he has done to our nation by caving (my words, not his) on the definition of marriage.

My conclusion, and this will not be shared by all of you, is policy implementation is more important than personality or character in evaluating political leaders. At this point, it might also be helpful to distinguish between policy outcomes and policy processes. My focus is on outcomes. Character and personality impact how policy processes are managed by leaders. They may influence but do not necessarily dictate policy outcomes. For many evangelicals, President Trump's governing style is offensive. They perceive his policy processes as ham-handed in the least, illegal at worst. For them, his leadership style emerging from his character and personality keeps them from being able to support President Trump.

My heartfelt desire would be for a president to have sound policy positions and a leadership style reflecting my values, while demonstrating high character and a winsome personality. But, if that person is not available, the decision of which candidate to support must be determined by the policy positions he or she will likely enact (and leave behind with the force of law) – not their character or personality or leadership style.

Some of you may strongly disagree with that conclusion and I respect your position. If you believe character and personality are the fundamental issues, then vote your convictions.

But for now, if you will at least consider my proposal, let's move on to the third and in many ways most perplexing question:

What are the most important policies when deciding which candidate to support?

Over the past two years, I have had several significant conversations with conservative, evangelical, Bible-believing, God-honoring Christians about this question. Here is what I have learned. There is no consensus answer to this question.

An attorney told me, "The crucial issue is the Supreme Court." He believes this because all important societal changes get sorted out by the courts – and ultimately the Supreme Court. He told me, "Hold your nose if you have to but vote for Trump." His concern is any of the Democratic candidates will appoint justices who will continue the trend of dismantling the legal framework that makes our nation strong.

A diplomat told me, "The crucial issue is foreign policy." He believes this because the external threats to America are real and growing daily. He told me, "President Trump's behavior is damaging our international credibility and costing us allies we have worked with for decades." His concern is historic allies will look for new partners if our approach to foreign policy remains the same.

A business leader told me, "The crucial issue is the economy." He reminded me, "Bill Clinton had it right – it's the economy, stupid." He celebrates national economic strength, global economic development, job growth, and sustained stock market growth as evidence of what really matters. He told me, "We need to keep Trump in office. Markets love consistency." His concern is as long as the economy is humming, all other problems can be managed.

A grandmother told me, “The crucial issue is immigration and concern for the poor.” While she believes in border security, she is heartbroken by the plight of immigrants. She told me, “Trump doesn’t have compassion for the poor. We need to get someone else in leadership to solve this problem.” Her concern is for people she perceives as being treated callously.

That’s two evangelicals who support President Trump and two who do not. These examples illustrate the struggle in deciding which policies are most important in evaluating candidates in the coming election.

If you agree policies are the determinative factor in deciding which politicians to support, then the next logical question is which policy or policies are most important? While there are many evangelical voices answering that question for you, mine will not join that chorus this morning. You have to decide this for yourself. Here are at least twenty policy issues (in alphabetical order) you may want consider: abortion, economy, education, energy, environment, foreign policy, gender issues, global-warming, healthcare, homelessness, immigration, marriage, military, national debt, racism, religious freedom, sexual harassment/abuse, socialism, Supreme Court, and terrorism.

Some of these issues will matter more to you than others. My suggestion is that you select three to five which are “game-changers” for you. Once you determine your position on those issues that matter most to you, then support the candidate who most closely shares your positions. It is very likely you will not agree with some other evangelicals on which issues are most important and which candidate you choose to support. You may be challenged as you have thoughtful (or heated) discussions with your friends, fellow church members, family members, and even colleagues here at Gateway. One friend who lives in a sedate Midwestern city recently told me, “Grace and courtesy are gone from political discussions in my world. Some of my close

friends won't even discuss what they believe about the coming election for fear of reprisals where they work or from neighbors.”

We can do better than this at Gateway. While we may not agree on all these matters, we can demonstrate graciousness in the midst of our passion about these issues and our conclusions about the candidate we will support.

Some cautions and conclusions

As we come to the end of this message, let me end with some cautions and conclusions about navigating your way in this highly-politicized climate – and a call to commitment from each of you.

First, make a realistic assessment of political leaders. For some of you, that means lowering your expectations of politicians. None of them are perfect, no one of them is our cultural savior, no one of them has solutions to all our problems, and no one of them will make us a “Christian nation.” If you believe character is the defining issue in deciding your vote, make sure you assess a candidate's character by legitimate sources – not just their social media presence or paid political advertisements.

Second, limit your media intake. Stop treating American politics like a soap opera. Limit your screen time and focus on family, ministry, and making a personal difference in the world. I stopped habitually watching televised news about two years ago and don't follow any politicians on any social media. I read a news summary each day and stay informed about pertinent facts without all the bluster and drama. When I need to follow up on a story, every major news source publishes the stories on their website. We are wasting precious hours

following specious speculation designed to drive ratings and ad sales – not deliver newsworthy information. Stop wasting your time on it.

Third, do your own thinking about policy issues. Read credible sources, consult people you trust, and make reasoned decisions. As you do this, choose the top three to five policy issues you feel are most important and base your voting decisions on those. You will not find a politician who agrees with you on twenty issues, but you will likely find one who represents your position on the major issues that mean the most to you.

Fourth, demonstrate humility and patience. This year will likely be a tumultuous challenge for all of us. Our current political maelstrom has the potential of dividing families, churches, ministry organizations, and denominations like never before in my lifetime. We cannot prevent others from causing this turmoil but we can choose how we act and react to them. Let's choose the high road and demonstrate the Christian character we long for in our elected leaders. In just a moment, I am going to ask you to commit to doing this in your political interactions for the balance of this year.

Finally, pray for political leaders. We are mandated to do this (1 Timothy 2:1-4). For all its flaws, America is still a bastion of religious freedom and, as a result, a source for global gospel expansion. We are told to pray we will be governed so we can “lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” and keep our focus on God’s ultimate agenda that “everyone be saved and...come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:2b, 4). We must pray for our nation to prosper so gospel-sharing can be accelerated – not just to make us richer and more powerful.

This biblical prayer mandate is sobering in light of two recent realities. First, Franklin Graham has, as of this morning, been barred from speaking at seven public venues previously

contracted for his upcoming evangelism events in England. In cancelling those contracts, all cited Graham's biblical position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage as the reason. Free speech and religious liberty in those communities no longer includes holding the historic, millennia old, Judeo-Christian positions on these issues. My concern is forces in our nation that would like to enact the same restrictions.

Second, think back to my Fall 2019 Convocation message about the collapse of evangelistic effectiveness among Southern Baptists. According to these verses, a primary prayer for governmental leaders is they will govern in a way that does not hinder gospel expansion. My greatest concern about this election year is Southern Baptists – including Gateway Seminary – will become so enamored with the election we believe winning it (from our perspective) somehow fulfills our mission. It does not. If we believe this, we will become even less focused on our eternal mission of communicating the gospel in our communities and around the world. We simply cannot allow that to happen. Our mission is timeless, has eternal consequences, and is too important to dissipate with trifles like political infighting or falsely placed hopes that political victories fulfill our gospel-sharing mission.

So, toward that end, let's conclude today with two acts of commitment. First, if you will commit to demonstrating Christian character in your political interactions with others throughout 2020 – please stand. Second, if you are willing to pray these biblical prayers from 1 Timothy for our governmental leaders – please join in small circles and let's pray together. If you would rather not respond publicly today, please sit quietly and we will dismiss the service with closing prayer and announcements in just a moment.