

WHY YOU MIGHT CONSIDER NOT VOTING THIS YEAR

by Jon Showalter

This is a good year for members of CMC churches to consider not voting in the presidential election.

But maybe not for the reasons you immediately think of. Perhaps you've heard opinions like the one posted by one of my Facebook friends a few months ago: "We have 300 million people in our country and out of all those people look at the candidates for president. Such folly. God must be laughing at us." Maybe you agree with that grim assessment. Or maybe you don't. With regard to that, I invite you to consider it doesn't make any difference whether you do or not.

One of the most disconcerting things I read this summer was Wayne Grudem's defense of voting for Donald Trump. If you haven't read it and want to, it's easy to find online under the title "Why Voting for Donald Trump Is a Morally Good Choice."

It was disconcerting to me because I didn't expect it. Several decades ago I studied theology with Grudem at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School near Chicago and he was one of my favorite instructors. He was a gifted communicator with a genuine and warm pastoral interest in his students. Back then he was working on how to understand Paul's Corinthian references to the gift of prophecy in the church and we discussed in class the proposal that Grudem was preparing to publish as *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. It made a lot of sense to me then and still does. In the years since I've sometimes used his *Bible Doctrine* text in a class I teach at RBC, even though I always end up arguing with his presentations on election and God's sovereignty.

When Jerry Falwell, Jr. endorsed Trump I raised my eyebrows but was not shocked. Liberty University, after all, was the home territory of the Moral Majority. And when James Dobson spoke

publicly regarding the upcoming election it fit his own long-established legacy of politically conservative advocacy.

But Wayne Grudem? What was he thinking? Why did he need to say anything at all? Wouldn't this have been a really good time to say nothing? Wasn't he afraid that his reputation as a thoughtful Evangelical theologian would be badly stained by taking sides in this unusually messy election? Just think how many times you've heard someone say something like, "I don't see how any intelligent human being, not to mention a committed follower of Jesus, could possibly consider voting for . . ." And then complete the sentence with the name of either leading candidate, depending on who your friends are.

That's a long way of saying that I had a lot of respect for Grudem, which is why his piece on Trump took me so off guard.

Let me be clear. I would also have found it disconcerting had Grudem defended the morality of voting for Hilary Clinton. The thing I found puzzling, I realized upon reflection, wasn't as much what he chose to say as the fact that he felt compelled to speak publicly at all.

And that left me with another question. Why are my own impulses about how Christian leaders approach politics so different, not just from Wayne Grudem's, but from those of many other American Christian leaders as well?

I don't know for sure but I have a theory. I think the explanation is simply that Christians in the Anabaptist tradition have usually thought differently about their relationship to the state than many other Christians have.

In many important ways Grudem stands in the Reformed tradition. That tradition grew out of the theology of John Calvin, the Swiss Reformer whose vision of how Christians ought to relate to government led him to give his approval to the public execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva in 1553. (Calvin's defenders often point out that he requested that the execution be by beheading rather than the slower and crueler burning at the stake. Servetus was burned.) The Reformed tradition draws much from St. Augustine, the fifth-century writer who developed the classic Christian defense of what



we now call just war theory. Augustine argued that so long as Christian soldiers were following orders, it was morally acceptable for them to kill their enemies. And Augustine himself was developing a theology for a church that, since the conversion of the emperor Constantine a century earlier, had been thrust into the centers of politics and power.

What does any of that have to do with voting? It's related because voting is one of the many contexts in which fundamental convictions regarding church and state find expression. When Grudem considers the upcoming election he concludes that Christians have a God-given obligation to vote. And if they must vote, then it makes sense for Christian leaders to offer them guidance.

As a Christian in the Anabaptist tradition, my understanding of how Christians relate to the state is quite different. I don't believe Christians may kill their enemies. I don't expect the government to look to the church for moral guidance. And I don't believe I have an obligation as a Christian citizen to vote in a presidential election, though I also don't believe it is wrong to do so.

Grudem's article reminded me of how different those visions are.

This year's election, therefore, provides an opportunity for congregations in CMC to review what we believe about Christians and the state. Once you accept the premise that you must vote, you have no choice but to pick someone. And even if neither of the leading options is morally problem-free, you don't have the option of sitting out the political process. And if you can't opt out you might end up writing things like "Why Voting for Donald Trump Is a Morally Good Choice."

All of this serves to bring into focus theological convictions that CMC historically has not shared with some branches of the American Protestant tradition. We've not embraced nor needed to defend Calvin's view of church and state. We've long believed that Augustine, pious though

he may personally have been, did the church a lasting and tragic disservice with his theory of Christian just war. And along with many others in the Believers Church tradition, we haven't viewed Constantine's conversion and the baptism of his army as something to be celebrated. In contrast, the convictions of churches in CMC have long been shaped by the simple conclusions of Anabaptists who gathered in 1527 at Schleithem. The CMC Statement of Theology quotes from that Schleithem gathering when it affirms that the state's use of the sword "is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ."

That is not to say that Christians in the Anabaptist tradition have never voted. Many have. And

CMC statements of theology and of practice don't mention the issue directly. Perhaps the closest they come is this line from the statement of practice:

"We should not jeopardize our primary allegiance to Jesus by participating in any office, career, or organization that requires us to employ the use of force, military service, or retaliation to accomplish its objectives."

Does voting "jeopardize our primary allegiance to Jesus"? Some people have concluded that it does and abstain from voting. Others don't see how it creates a conflict; for them it's simply expressing a preference in a process that is one of the privileges of a democratic political system.

Maybe you think this year's candidates make it easier not to vote. Or maybe you think they make it harder. Either way, an election season can serve as a reminder of how an Anabaptist understanding of the kingdom of God might lead a person to sit this one out. Just like it does every four years.

DOES VOTING "JEOPARDIZE OUR PRIMARY ALLEGIANCE TO JESUS"?

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