

MINISTRY WATCH

The Political Illusion

It's important to keep our priorities aligned with Scripture,
especially during this political season

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Both major political parties have now completed their national conventions, on full display in nightly primetime broadcasts. News coverage between now and November will be dominated by political coverage. Candidates will spend billions of dollars on advertisements. If you didn't know any better, you might think all this political activity was the most important thing going on in the world today. But, fortunately, you are a Christian. You know better. However, many of our neighbors are not, and do not. They have succumbed to what the French philosopher **Jacques Ellul** called “**the political illusion.**”

If you have ever read Ellul, you know that his ideas do not easily reduce to sound bites. That said, I think it is fair to reduce the “the political illusion” to this: the illusion that politics plays a greater role in our lives than they do. Politics and the propaganda associated with politics demand more of our attention than it deserves, and when we yield to that demand, we give politics more power than it should have.

Ellul explained the “political illusion” in his 1965 book *L'illusion Politique*. It was published in English in 1967. Jacques Ellul's work is getting more attention from evangelical scholars today, as it should. I particularly recommend Christopher Watkin's *Biblical Critical Theory*. This thick but highly readable book is not primarily about Ellul, but Watkin is a student of Ellul, and Ellul's thinking permeates Watkin's arguments.

Christians understand that what has gone wrong with the world can't be fixed with political activism or culture war victories. I have a lot of sympathy for the expression “politics is downstream from culture.” That is mostly true.

But a more complete truth is that culture is downstream from theology and anthropology and ontology. Politics and culture are both effects, not causes. Politics and culture influence each other, sometimes in helpful ways and sometimes in unhelpful ways.

The abortion debate is a case in point. For many years, the pro-life cause was winning the hearts and minds of the American people primarily because it operated upstream of politics. For most of the past 30 years, most Americans believed that abortion should have significant restrictions. However, when both political parties decided abortion could help them, abortion became a wedge issue. It no longer made sense for the two parties to work together on this issue. The abortion debate evolved from one which used persuasion and empathy to one which raw political power became the weapon of choice. The result? Two years after the *Dobbs* decision overturned *Roe*, the number of abortions in America reached record levels, largely because of chemical abortions and telemedicine. According to a recent Gallup survey,

a majority of Americans now believe abortion should be legal in all or most circumstances. That finding represents a significant shift in attitude in just the past few years. Two years after *Dobbs*, we are farther away from actually ending abortion than we have been in years.

In short, the pro-life movement won the legal battle but lost the battle for the hearts and minds of the American people. In fact, the techniques of *realpolitik* it used to win the legal battle are precisely what turned many influenceable Americans away from the pro-life cause.

That is not to say that we should abandon either political or cultural activities. Rather, I am saying that the roots of our current malaise are more fundamental, more foundational. Our problem is not that we have made bad political choices or have abandoned biblical morality. We have, but that is not the cause of our problem, it is a consequence.

The problem is that we have abandoned a biblical ontology and epistemology. In other words, we abandoned biblical ways of being and understanding the world. And by “we,” I mean Christians.

In other words, the problem we face today is not so much that pagans are acting like pagans. The problem is that Christians are acting like pagans. We dress up our paganism in religious garb, but it is paganism nonetheless.

This notion crystalized for me this week as I edited a story about a pastor’s conference hosted by **Turning Point USA** (a conference we reported on here). At that conference, organizer **Charlie Kirk** said, “There is only one way to save this country. Awake the beast that is the American church.” The church is not a beast; it is the Bride of Christ. Kirk seemed unaware that in Scripture, the word “beast” is often used to describe Satan. Both rhetorically and theologically, it would be hard to find two sentences so opposed to a Christian worldview. But he got a standing ovation from the 1200 mostly evangelical pastors gathered for the event.

It should also be clear by now that repairing the foundations will take more than legal victories. Getting a law passed or a court precedent overturned or even a president elected is not a bad thing, but if we accomplish these ends by any other than biblical means, the victory can be downright destructive. We should never forget Jacques Ellul’s warning that political victories are temporary, even pyrrhic.

So, given our current state, is recovery possible? The short answer to that question is yes. Indeed, that is the nature of the grace of God: no condition is outside its reach. That’s the good news of the Gospel. Further, we have the promise of Scripture that the gates of hell will not prevail against Christ’s church. (Matt. 16:18) Such realities should give us great hope and comfort.

But our recovery will not come because we have taken control of the White House. Chuck Colson, a man who knew something about the White House, used to say that “salvation will not arrive on Air Force One.”

So, if politics is not the source of our strength, what is? Jesus said, “For even the son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) If that is true of Jesus, how much more so should it be true of us? Jesus also said, “By this shall all men know you are my disciples, that you love one another.” (John 13:35)

Politics can be a tool we use to love one another and serve one another, and I hope you will vote this November. But politics is not our only tool, and it is rarely the most effective tool. When we forget that, we have taken our eyes off the example of Jesus and succumbed to the “political illusion.”

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