

Can a Vote for Trump Be Morally Justified?

In my 2020 book, “Evangelicals at the Crossroads: Will We Pass the Trump Test?,” I devoted an entire chapter to the question, “Does Character Still Count and Does Morality Still Matter?” Four years later, that question is still relevant, especially for Christian conservatives. They (or, we) cannot possibly vote for Kamala Harris for a host of reasons. But can we, in good conscience, vote for Donald Trump?

Back in 1998, in response to the candidacy of Bill Clinton, the Southern Baptist Convention drafted a resolution in which it was stated clearly that “that moral character matters to God and should matter to all citizens, especially God’s people, when choosing public leaders.”

In keeping with this, the resolution urged “all Americans to embrace and act on the conviction that character does count in public office, and to elect those officials and candidates who, although imperfect, demonstrate consistent honesty, moral purity and the highest character.”

How do we reconcile this with our support for Trump (and I write this as a two-time Trump voter)? Does he, “although imperfect, demonstrate consistent honesty, moral purity and the highest character”? Hardly.

How, then, can we justify our vote for him?

Many have answered, “We’re electing a president, not a pastor (or priest). We’re voting for a commander-in-chief, not a spiritual leader.”

But is this how we felt in the days before Trump? Did we use this same reasoning when Bill Clinton was running for president? Weren’t we saying that character counted and

morality mattered? And haven't we been known as "Values Voters"? What "values" would those be? Didn't we once call ourselves the "moral majority"?

The SBC resolution stated, "Tolerance of serious wrong by leaders sears the conscience of the culture, spawns unrestrained immorality and lawlessness in the society, and surely results in God's judgment." Do we still believe that today? Or have our own consciences become seared?

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The resolution also affirmed "that moral character matters to God and should matter to all citizens, especially God's people, when choosing public leaders." But today, when concerned Christians point to Trump's questionable morality, they are called legalists or shortsighted or religious or worse. What has happened to our moral convictions?

The book of Proverbs warns us about the deadly power of the tongue and about the damage a "fool" can do through his or her words. (In Proverbs, a "fool" refers to someone who is morally bankrupt rather than someone who is intellectually challenged.) The last thing a nation wants is a "fool" for its president (or king).

Why, then, vote for Trump?

When pressed further on this issue, the answer would sound something like this:

We still believe that character counts and morality matters, but things have become so extreme in America that we have to elect a street fighter, someone who stands up for our cause—not just for our good, but for the good of the generations to come.

In short, the battle we are fighting is an existential one,

with our most fundamental liberties under attack. And, many of us reason, Trump, with all his shortcomings, is the best man for the job.

As Tucker Carlson said in December 2019, “If you’re wondering why so many Christians have been willing to support this president despite his personal life, this is why: It’s because whatever his flaws, he’s made it clear that he’s not the enemy of Christians.” Many a Trump supporter would say, “Precisely so!”

In harmony with these sentiments, when Franklin Graham was asked why he talked about politics more than his father did, he responded, “When my daddy was a child, they read the Bible in school.” (While I do not have the exact citation for this quote, a senior staff member of Graham confirmed its accuracy.) How things have changed!

But can we really look to Trump to fight for the things that are important for us? On Friday, Aug. 23, he posted on Truth Social that if he is reelected, his “administration will be great for women and their reproductive rights.”

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What? Here is an allegedly pro-life candidate using the misleading rhetoric of the pro-abortion camp (speaking of “reproductive rights” rather than the so-called right to abortion) and promising this “right” to women.

Talk about a deep betrayal of our values, also reflected in the GOP’s gutted 2024 platform, where the pro-life plank is virtually gone and all opposition to same-sex “marriage” has completely disappeared.

How, then, can Christian conservatives justify their vote for Trump?

Many would still argue that, despite his caving in on some of the issues most important to us and despite his many glaring character weaknesses, he will still do a better job on the economy, on securing our borders, on standing with Israel, on standing up to our international enemies. And so, overall, balancing out the pros and the cons, Trump is the better choice.

This could well be true.

But let's stop pretending Trump is someone he isn't. The cards are on the table for all to see.

In the end, though, it may all come down to this: A vote *for* Trump is, more than anything, a vote *against* Harris.

So, we can vote for Trump without being enamored by him, without being his defenders or apologists, and without being unrealistic in our expectations.

And if we do choose to vote for him, a choice that the vast majority of Christian conservatives will make, we must remember to keep our focus on Jesus and the gospel and to be sure that, to the extent Trump's character deficiencies are a negative example, we distance ourselves from those deficiencies while setting the bar high in our lives and conduct.

We can vote for him without becoming like him.

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