

Fellow Presbyterian Thinks He Understands the ‘Trump Train’

A mainline Presbyterian pastor took to his pastoral blog recently to attempt to do what so many have already tried to accomplish: adequately explain the “Trump Train” phenomenon.

The Rev. Robert Cunningham, pastor at Tates Creek Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, penned the blog post titled “In Love With Donald Trump” late last week, taking a different approach than those of other theologians. To explain his theory—that Christians’ are compelled to vote based on what they love rather than what they believe—he turned to Augustine.

Augustine of Hippo was an early Christian theologian whose works *The City of God* and *Confessions* deeply impacted both Western Christianity and Western culture. His works also deeply impacted the Protestant Reformation and most Calvinist denominations, which includes Presbyterians.

“I knew enough Augustine to know that we are motivated by our loves,” he wrote. “When I say love, I mean much more than romance, though romance is certainly a very powerful love. I use love to describe those deeper longing and desires of the human heart.

“Contrary to Western enlightenment that views us as minds compelled by our thoughts, the Bible views us as lovers compelled by our loves. Ideas certainly inform our loves, but ultimately we are what we love. Or to put it another way, we follow our desires more than our doctrine.”

Cunningham said his views on this subject were better informed after reading James K.A. Smith’s book *Desiring the Kingdom*. He said it helped him see the way in which our loves are formed by our habits.

"Of course we know this is true with our personal habits, but what we often don't see is the formative power of corporate habits, what Smith refers to as 'cultural liturgies,'" he wrote. "Every culture shares common habits, and these habits form common loves."

He then applied that to the phenomenon surrounding Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump:

"Behind everything that a culture loves are cultural liturgies that have formed those loves.

"Now consider Donald Trump. In one sense, he makes no sense. From a character and even policy standpoint, evangelical support of Donald Trump is utterly mystifying, and countless articles are being written trying to explain this phenomenon. But all of them seem to come to the same conclusion: Evangelical support for Donald Trump is a referendum on the current state of evangelical doctrine and convictions. I think these explanations are missing the point. I agree that current evangelical thought is woefully shallow, but it's not like you need to be John Calvin to discern the mess that is Donald Trump. I think we aren't giving the convictions of evangelicals enough credit. They know enough to know what Trump is saying and doing is wrong, and yet they are still supporting him.

"Why? Because we are never compelled by our ideals like we are by our loves. And when you look at Donald Trump through the shared loves of the evangelical culture, he starts to make perfect sense."

Cunningham, however, like many mainline Presbyterian pastors today, is socially left-of-center in his worldview. In his blog post, he openly takes swipes at consumer-driven capitalism, which he calls "greed" and "love of money."

He then goes further by suggesting evangelicals have been "trained" by those cultural liturgies:

“What happens when the liturgies of our greedy culture train evangelicals to love money and power? What happens when the liturgies of talk radio train evangelicals to love anger and paranoia? What happens when the liturgies of social media train evangelicals to love sensational sound bites more than thoughtful discourse? What happens when the liturgies of modern worship services train evangelicals to love novel, flashy and glib emotional experiences that feel more like a rally than corporate worship? What happens when the conference culture of the church trains evangelicals to love the big celebrity leader? What happens when preaching that prioritizes relevant, shocking, and brash sermons trains evangelicals to love “tell it like it is” ranting? What happens when the liturgies from the days of the Moral Majority train evangelicals to love America as much as Jesus, which then leads to an incessant longing within churches to “make America great again!”

“What happens? Evangelicals in love with Donald Trump happens.

“Evangelicals don’t believe in Donald Trump as much as they love Donald Trump and all that Donald Trump represents. Watch these rallies and you will quickly see they have nothing to do with inspiring ideas and hopeful policies; they’re worship services. And standing on the stage before the great throng of longing souls is the manifestation of their common love feeding their hungry hearts with his nonsense.”

In conclusion, Cunningham suggests the Trump phenomenon signals a need for rebuke, but where that rebuke should be directed is less certain. The easy answer, he wrote, is Christians’ doctrine and conviction, but the better answer is “our loves.”

“Indeed, Donald Trump is a clear indication that the evangelical Church is ignoring the Apostle John’s simple command, ‘Do not love the world or anything in the world,’” he wrote. “Evangelicals in our day are in love with the world and

things of this world, and that is why evangelicals in our day are in love with Donald Trump.”