

Have Evangelicals Lost Their Credibility by Voting for Trump?

I find it ironic that the same people who have mocked us for years as hypocrites, bigots, haters, homophobes, transphobes and worse now tell us that we have lost our moral credibility by voting for Trump.

It is true there are Christian leaders in other nations who feel that we (meaning, in particular, white evangelicals) have compromised our moral witness by voting for Trump in such overwhelming numbers (81 percent of white evangelicals voted for him). And it is true that it is difficult to reconcile our historic mantra of “character matters” with a vote for Trump, unless we are counting on his imminent moral transformation, which is certainly a risky way to vote.

Considering, then, that Trump would have been the last person on a list of candidates evangelicals would have drawn up—actually, he would not have made the list at all—it’s easy to see how the world could think we have sold our souls to the devil in some kind of desperate effort to regain power.

But for people to chastise us and say that we have forfeited our moral credibility in the eyes of our critics is to forget that, in the eyes of those critics, we had no moral credibility to lose.

Some of this, no doubt, was our own fault, since much of the evangelical church has, indeed, been hypocritical, with rampant no-fault divorce in our midst, with a plague of pornography in our pews and with more leadership scandals (both financial and sexual) than we can count. Why should the world take our moral witness seriously?

But that is not the only reason we have been despised. To the contrary, a major reason that the world hates us is our moral stands and our refusal to capitulate to the culture, as a result of which we are likened to Hitler and the Nazis, to ISIS and the Taliban, to the KKK and other hate groups. This is all because we refuse to celebrate the redefinition of marriage or affirm the latest gender identity fad. And should I mention what pro-abortion feminists think of evangelicals, especially male evangelicals?

So when I hear our critics call us hypocrites for voting for Trump—and again, I speak here primarily of white evangelicals—I have to laugh and say, “I thought we already were hypocrites!”

And I can only wonder what these same critics would have said if we had elected Ted Cruz, a staunch, once-married, Bible-quoting evangelical, as our candidate? They would probably accuse us of setting up secret internment camps for all non-church-attending Americans and stealthily planning to take over the society. Can you even imagine what their accusations would be?

All that being said, as I have stated before, I do believe that some of us did lose credibility by the way in which we backed Trump, giving him a free pass for the very infractions for which we were ready to condemn Bill Clinton, overlooking his ugly attacks on others, and forgetting that the president and first lady are, in many ways, exemplars for the population.

In *The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals*, which he wrote in 1998, Bill Bennett explained the danger of embracing the pro-Bill Clinton arguments that his private conduct was of no concern to the nation:

“These arguments define us down; they assume a lower common

denominator of behavior and leadership than we Americans ought to accept. And if we do accept it, we will have committed an unthinking act of moral and intellectual disarmament. In the realm of American ideals and the great tradition of public debate, the high ground will have been lost. And when we need to rely again on this high ground—as surely we will need to—we will find it drained of its compelling moral power. In that sense, then, the arguments invoked by Bill Clinton and his defenders represent an assault on American ideals, even if you assume the president did nothing improper. So the arguments need to be challenged.”

Character, then, does matter, and if we evangelicals did sacrifice character on the altar of political expediency, then we have further damaged our witness in the eyes of a watching world. Some in the world still expect moral goodness from the church.

That being said, it is clear that a large number of evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump did so for highly moral reasons, including protecting the unborn and standing up for religious freedoms. Are these not moral, Christian causes?

As explained by Jonathan Van Maren, “Many of my non-Christian and liberal friends find it bewildering that both evangelicals and Catholics voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, a thrice-married casino operator infamous for his vulgar trash talk. I want to take a moment to explain to them directly why most Christians voted for him anyways. It’s simple, really: Christians voted for Donald Trump because they felt that the threat a de facto third Obama term posed to Christian communities was an existential one.”

He continued, “The attacks on Christians from the highest levels of government have been relentless now for nearly a decade. Obama wants to force Christian churches and schools to accept the most radical and most recent version of gender ideology, and he is willing to issue executive decrees on the

issue to force the less enlightened to get in line. Christian concerns are dismissed out of hand as 'transphobia.'"

And note that Van Maren had not yet mentioned Hillary Clinton, of whom he had much to say.

Where then do we stand today?

With regard to our most hostile critics, as long as we uphold our biblical values, we will be reviled and condemned. That is to be expected.

With regard to those outside the church who still think Christians should live moral lives and care for the needy, let us step higher and demonstrate the life-changing power of the gospel.

With regard to our relationship with the president, we must conduct ourselves with integrity and honor, serving as a moral compass to our president rather than his tool. In that way, we will serve both God and the society.