

Respectful Response to John Piper: Here's Why I Voted for Trump

John Piper has been a friend—a good and faithful friend—for more than 40 years. I thank God for his remarkable worldwide ministry, his evident deep love for God, his faithfulness to every word of Scripture and the way his life of self-sacrifice continues to provide a challenge to me personally.

When we have opportunities to be together, I enjoy every minute of conversation with him. I pray for him regularly, as I believe he does for me. I agree with probably 98% of everything he has written and said during his entire ministry.

But he and I have reached different conclusions about this year's presidential election. His Oct. 22 article, "Policies, Persons and Paths to Ruin," explained why he thought it would be wrong for him to support either candidate in this election. (He does not mention either candidate by name, but the article is about this election and he compares one candidate who supports policies that endorse "baby-killing," "sex-switching" and "socialistic overreach," (evidently Joe Biden) to the other candidate who is guilty of sins of "unrepentant sexual immorality" and "unrepentant boastfulness" (evidently Donald Trump).

I am writing to explain why I have reached a different decision, and why I voted a few days ago for Donald Trump.

I would summarize Piper's argument as follows:

1. The personal sins of a leader can be as harmful to persons and to nations as morally evil laws.
2. Christians communicate a falsehood when we act as if

policies and laws are more precious than being a certain kind of person.

3. The horrible sin of pride leads people to other sins, including defending abortion, and therefore voting for a clearly boastful candidate might also be indirectly supporting abortion.

4. Voting for either candidate would compromise a person's Christian witness

As is characteristic of Piper's personal humility, he allows that "you need not be sinning if you weigh matters differently," and adds, "my way need not be yours." In what follows, I want to give reasons why I do "weigh matters differently" in all four of those points with respect to this election.

1. The claim that the personal sins of a leader can be as harmful to persons and to nations as morally evil laws. Piper writes, "I remain baffled that so many Christians consider the sins of unrepentant sexual immorality ... unrepentant boastfulness ... unrepentant vulgarity ... unrepentant factiousness, and the like, to be only *toxic* for our nation, while policies that endorse baby-killing, sex-switching, freedom-limiting and socialistic overreach are viewed as *deadly*."

He continues, "These are sins mentioned in the New Testament ... they are sins that destroy people ... They are deadly *forever*. They lead to eternal destruction (2 Thess. 1:9)."

He adds, "It is not a small thing to treat lightly a pattern of public behaviors that lead to death."

Furthermore, he says that such sins are "nation-corrupting. They move out from centers of influence to infect whole cultures. The last five years bear witness to this infection at almost every level of society ... There is a character

connection between rulers and subjects. When the Bible describes a king by saying 'he sinned and made Israel to sin' (1 Kings 14:16) ... It means his influence shaped the people."

My reply:

a. There is a difference between the personal influence of a leader's example, which may be rejected, and laws that compel obedience. Piper's argument fails to recognize that people can decide not to imitate the sins of a leader, but they cannot do that with laws. Laws require obedience. But millions of people have seen and decided *not* to imitate Trump's character flaws. The most frequent comment I hear from Trump supporters is something like, "I don't like his insulting tweets or his personality, but I'm supporting him anyway because he has brought about good laws and policies."

Americans are perfectly free to say, "Trump's boastfulness offends me. and I don't want to act that way myself." But if laws are passed (and upheld by the courts) that enforce the LGBT agenda, no creative professional like a cake decorator (or photographer or florist) will be free to say, "I believe same-sex marriage is morally wrong, and I won't use my artistic talent to decorate a cake celebrating same-sex marriage." No high school girl will be free to say, "I won't undress and change clothes for my gym class because there are boys in the locker room who claim to be girls." No Christian adoption agency will be free to say, "We will not place children with same-sex couples."

And if Democrats gain control of our government and the Supreme Court, and enact their desired policies, no Christian taxpayer will be free to say, "I refuse to pay that portion of my taxes the government is using to pay for abortions." No business owner will be free to say, "I will not buy medical insurance for my employees that pays for abortions and sex-change surgeries." There will be only two choices: violate your conscience or else be driven to bankruptcy or go to jail.

Finally, I have not seen any increase in boastfulness or sexual immorality in the United States as a result of people imitating Donald Trump's behavior. I know of no one who has become more boastful because of President Trump being boastful. Nor have I heard of anyone who excused his own unfaithful conduct in marriage because Donald Trump was unfaithful several years ago. Instead, such actions have been universally condemned by leaders in both political parties, and they have hurt, not helped, Donald Trump's reputation. They have not been held up as models to imitate. They have been used as examples to avoid.

As for the Bible verse that says King Jeroboam "made Israel to sin" (1 Kings 14:16), the previous chapters do not say that this involved imitation of Jeroboam's moral character, but instead the text specifies that Jeroboam's sin was in making idols and constructing alternative worship centers and then ordaining priests who were not Levites, all of which contradicted God's commands. Jeroboam "made two calves of gold" and then he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel. ... And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites" (1 Kings 12:28-31, 14:9).

b. Political policies are not, in general, more important than personal character, but they are the primary factor to consider in a political election. A candidate's character and policies are both important to consider before voting. And I would agree that there are some character flaws so serious they would by themselves disqualify a candidate (such as an avowed racist). But in most elections, and with most candidates, we have to choose between two rather ordinary human beings, both of whom have flaws. In that case, an evaluation of their policies becomes decisive. And that is the

case in this election.

c. Christians who support Trump do not encourage imitation of his flaws but openly criticize them. Piper writes as if supporting Donald Trump means encouraging people to imitate his flaws. But I know of no Christian leader who has toned down his or her criticism of unfaithfulness in marriage or criticism of pride since President Trump took office. And certainly no leader has said anything like “Because Donald Trump is president, Americans should feel free to be unfaithful in their marriages and become more boastful and prouder.” No, the Christian leaders who support Trump have explicitly rejected and criticized things such as his previous sexual immorality and his boastfulness.

d. I have a more positive evaluation of Trump’s character than John Piper does.

Here is the point at which people will make different political judgments, because human beings are extremely complex, and therefore an accurate assessment of a person’s character is difficult. It certainly should not be done quickly on the basis of small snippets of information. And complicating the task is the fact that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), so every human being has flaws that others can criticize.

Piper speaks of Trump’s character in entirely negative terms. Because of unbelievably hostile reporting in the mainstream press, other people can see no good character traits at all in President Trump. My assessment is different, and I think it is more balanced. I wrote this in 2016, and it still applies:

“He is egotistical, bombastic and brash. He often lacks nuance in his statements. Sometimes he blurts out mistaken ideas ... that he later must abandon. He insults people. He can be vindictive when people attack him ... He has been married three times and claims to have been unfaithful in his marriages.

These are certainly flaws, but I don't think they are disqualifying flaws in this election."

On the other hand, I think some of the accusations hurled against him are unjustified. His many years of business conduct show that he is not racist or anti-(legal) immigrant or anti-Semitic or misogynistic—I think these are unjust magnifications by a hostile press exaggerating some careless statements he has made. I think he is deeply patriotic and sincerely wants the best for the country. He has been an unusually successful problem solver in business. He has raised remarkable children. Many who have known him personally speak highly of his kindness, thoughtfulness and generosity.

And now, after his nearly four years in office, I would add that he has shown remarkable courage of his convictions, faithfulness to his campaign promises, steadfastness of purpose in spite of an astoundingly hostile press, incredible energy in the performance of his job, dignity and even eloquence in many formal speeches and ceremonies at home and abroad, respect and appreciation for his wife Melania and his sons and daughters, and a wide-ranging understanding of the hundreds of different issues that every president faces. In contrast to his past life, during his term in office, there has not been even a hint of any sexual impropriety. He is sometimes boastful, but on a number of occasions I have seen him publicly give credit to many other people for things that have been accomplished. And I think he has shown mature and wise judgment in a variety of situations he has faced as president.

e. With Trump, we will get good policies and character flaws, but with Biden we will get bad policies and character flaws. It is easy to compare President Trump with a hypothetical "perfect" president and conclude that he falls short, but that is not our choice. If Trump is not reelected, we will have President Biden, with an entirely different set of character flaws. The multiple allegations that Vice President Biden used

his government office and influence to enrich members of his own family with millions of dollars from China, Russia and Ukraine should be of deep concern, because using government power to enrich one's own family is the consistent characteristic of corrupt leaders in many countries of the world.

f. The Trump administration has brought to prominence many leaders with exemplary lives. Donald Trump is not the only person we are voting for. It is remarkable that the Trump administration has elevated so many self-professing evangelical Christians—far more than any in my lifetime—into positions of high influence in our government. They also provide role models for Americans. To vote for Trump as president is also to vote for Mike Pence as vice president, Mike Pompeo as secretary of state, Ben Carson as secretary of housing and urban development, Betsy DeVos as secretary of education, Russell Vought as director of the office of management and budget, and numerous others. In addition, Trump has appointed numerous deeply committed Roman Catholics to various positions, the most recent being Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court. The character of these leaders is also a role model for the nation.

2. The claim that Christians communicate a falsehood when we act as if policies and laws are more precious than being a certain kind of person. Piper writes, “Christians communicate a falsehood to unbelievers ... when we act as if policies and laws that protect life and freedom are more precious than being a certain kind of person.”

He also says, “I find it bewildering that Christians can be so sure that greater damage will be done by bad judges, bad laws and bad policies than is being done by the culture-infecting spread of the gangrene of sinful self-exultation, and boasting and strife-stirring.”

My reply:

a. I agree with John Piper that, considering all of life, a person's character is far more important than his or her policies and laws. I agree that, from God's perspective, a person's character is of utmost importance. God said to the prophet Samuel, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7b).

b. But when an election determines what kind of policies and laws we will have, and when both candidates have character flaws, then differences in policies and laws have primary importance. A presidential election is not deciding what is most important in all of life, which is certainly our relationship with Christ. Paul writes, "Yes, certainly. I count everything as loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). A presidential election is simply choosing the leaders of our government. In such a situation, the primary purpose is to decide what kind of government we will have, and in that situation policies and laws are not the only consideration, but they are the most important consideration.

3. The claim that the horrible sin of pride leads people to other sins, including defending abortion, and therefore voting for a clearly boastful candidate might also be indirectly supporting abortion. Piper writes, "Where does the wickedness of defending child-killing come from? It comes from hearts of self-absorbed arrogance and boasting (James 4:1-2). In other words, it comes from the very character that so many Christian leaders are treating us comparatively innocuous."

My reply:

a. The primary motive behind support for abortion rights is a desire for sexual freedom without the responsibility of raising children. I do not think that "arrogance and boasting" are the primary motivations that lead people to support abortion rights. I think rather the primary motive is rebellion against God's commands that forbid sex outside of

marriage between a man and woman; The motive is a desire for sexual freedom without the responsibility of raising children. As for doctors who perform abortions, I think the primary motivation is greed.

Piper refers to James 4:1-2 to show that support for his statement that “child-killing” comes from “self-absorbed arrogance and boasting.” But these verses specifically speak about coveting, not boasting, that leads to murder: “You lust and do not have, so you kill” (James 4:2a).

There is no doubt a measure of pride involved in all sins, but I do not think there is a direct causal relationship between a president who exhibits pride and the prevalence of abortion in a society. It seems to me entirely consistent to support a boastful candidate who supports executive actions and laws that restrict abortion rights.

4. The claim that voting for either candidate would compromise a person's Christian witness. In closing, Piper explains, “Where does that leave me as I face a civic duty on Nov. 3? Here's my answer ... I will not develop some calculus to determine which path of destruction I will support. That is not my duty. My calling is to lead people to see Jesus Christ, trust his forgiveness for sins, treasure him above everything in this world ... That calling is contradicted by supporting either pathway to cultural corruption and eternal ruin.”

My reply:

a. If a significant number of evangelicals follow John Piper's example, it will guarantee a Biden victory. Imagine what would happen if all evangelical Christians followed Piper's example and decided to write in someone else's name instead of voting for either Trump or Biden. The result would be an overwhelming landslide victory for Biden, because the largest single bloc of Trump supporters is evangelical Christians. In 2016, 80% of white evangelicals voted for Trump, while 16% voted for

Clinton and 4% didn't vote for president or voted for some other candidate. If that 4% of "vote for neither one" evangelical voters had been 5% or 6%, Hillary Clinton would have been president.

So if Trump loses the evangelical bloc, Biden wins. In fact, if *a significant number* of Christians decide not to vote for either Trump or Biden, the result will not be some ideal third-party president. It will be a Biden presidency, which (in my opinion) will bring great harm to the nation.

Therefore, the decision not to vote for either candidate is not a neutral position for evangelicals. When evangelicals decide not to vote for either candidate, this takes voters primarily from Trump's base and therefore helps Biden win the election.

b. Supporting Trump for his good policies while criticizing his flaws and respecting another person's political judgment does not compromise a person's Christian witness.

In this atmosphere of political polarization, Christians have an opportunity to enhance their Christian witness when they discuss politics by showing a gracious temperament, listening respectfully to the other person's viewpoint, and explaining that we seek good government (as best we understand it) for our neighbors, not from base motives but because of Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:39).

c. Supporting Trump for his good policies while criticizing his flaws is supporting a pathway to cultural improvement, not a "pathway to cultural corruption and eternal ruin." I differ with my friend John Piper about the results of a second term for President Trump. In Trump second term, I look forward to

–The appointment of more originalist judges (who will interpret the laws and not make new laws on their own).

–Further legal restrictions on abortion.

- Greater protections for religious freedom and freedom of conscience.
- Lower taxes.
- Fewer government regulations.
- A rapidly growing economy.
- Low unemployment rates (especially significant for ethnic minorities).
- Increased prosperity for people at every income level.
- Additional history-making agreements between Israel and additional Arab nations.
- A clearheaded recognition of the economic, military and information threat from China.
- A high value placed on human freedom and on personal accountability for committing crimes.
- Increasing numbers of children eligible for taxpayer-supported school choice.
- A secure border followed by a comprehensive reform of our immigration system.
- And an increase in police presence in high crime neighborhoods, with a resulting decrease in crime.

On the other hand, if evangelicals stay away from voting for either Biden or Trump, then under a Biden presidency I would expect:

- The appointment of hundreds of judges who take the law in their own hands and even consider themselves to be above the original meaning of the Constitution.
- Laws that allow abortion up to the moment of birth and even

after.

- The use of tax money to pay for abortions and gender reassignment surgery.
- The crippling of our economy with ever-increasing government control and ever-increasing taxes.
- Increased unemployment.
- A weaker military unable to counter the increasing aggressiveness of China in the world's oceans.
- A Jimmy Carter-like foreign policy of appeasement.
- Abandoning Israel to fend for itself in the Middle East.
- Adding additional seats to make a liberal majority on the Supreme Court.
- Draconian laws that compel artistic professionals to affirm the validity of same-sex marriage even when contrary to their consciences.
- A reinstatement of the Obama-era guidelines that required schools to allow biological males to use girls' bathrooms, locker rooms and showers and to allow them to compete in women's sports.
- A massive increase in energy costs.
- Ever-increasing restrictions on police forces leading to an increase in crime.
- The proliferation of violence and intimidation to nullify freedom of speech (in practice) for those who disagree with the liberal political agenda.
- Open borders.
- Sanctuary cities.

–And a complete federal takeover of our health care system.

These are two vastly different kinds of nations. The first one features increasing freedom, personal responsibility and human flourishing. The second one features ever-increasing government control of every aspect of our lives, significant losses of freedom and the implementation of many laws and regulations contrary to the moral teachings of Scripture. That is why voting for Trump seems to me to be the most loving, most faithful choice for a Christian.

Finally, just as John Piper in his article modeled respect for those who have another position, so I also respect him for the courage and clarity of his convictions and for his characteristic willingness to advocate a potentially unpopular position because he thinks it is right. I hope that in what I have written here I have modeled a way to disagree with a friend graciously and in a way that will not damage our friendship in the future.

After I finished writing this article, I sent it to John for any comments. He replied that I had represented him fairly, and he assured me that he counted me as a dear friend. He also pointed out how I could make one of my arguments stronger! I think that only someone with a strong confidence in the sovereignty of God over all history would do that in the midst of a serious disagreement about the future of a nation. {eoa}

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