



First Principles Project

American Awakening | National Association of Evangelicals | Christianity Today

Full Sermon Text

PART 2. Citizens of Our Country

We have discussed the 2020 “Trifecta of Trauma” . . . the greatest health crisis of the past century . . . economic dislocation for so many . . . And with the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arberry, and others, we are experiencing a great racial reckoning and social unrest.

And now — the political season is starting to feel like it may tear us apart altogether.

For this part of the series, we will call 2020 the “Great Disruption” — sure, we know the trauma part exists and is very real, but at least this Disruption” concept allows us some agency and action in all this.

To name it for what it is — a Disruption — and choose to do something about it — or not.

Some may know the work of the late Clayton Christensen, a great Harvard Business School Professor for many years, who developed the theory of "disruptive innovation", which has been called the most influential business idea of the early 21st century.

Christensen introduced "disruption" in his 1997 book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, and it led *The Economist* to term him "the most influential management thinker of his time."

And since then, the concepts of “innovation” and “disruption” have gone hand-in-hand, at least in the business and management world.

What do you do when you have been disrupted? Do you retreat back to some place you can’t be disrupted further, if that is even possible? Do you quit and just opt out?

Or do you think about what has happened before, and consider what is no longer working — either because of mistakes that have been made or circumstances that have changed — and you innovate.

In this part of the series called “Citizens of Our Country” — we are going to take an honest look at mistakes that have been made and circumstances that have changed.

And returning to the first part of our series, discussing our Christian principles as Citizens of the Kingdom — I am going to challenge us all to meet this Great Disruption in our nation with our own Kingdom Innovation.



Let's start with some mistakes that have been made by the Church over time, and touch on some themes we hit in the first part of the series.

As Christians we are supposed to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and when we live that way — but only when we live that way — we can serve as the transformative agents God wants us to be.

As you look at the landscape across the church, do you think we are living that way?

Are conservative or progressive Christians demonstrating more humility, grace, and truth, in the public square than our non-Christian counterparts? Are we known for bringing love and generosity into the public discussion? Even if they disagree with the policies we support, is the world so struck by the Christ-like nature of our public witness that they desire to learn more about Jesus?

If we are honest with ourselves, we will have to admit that the answer is no, and the same division runs straight through the heart of the church. Christians are no different than the rest of Americans — they feel like they are not understood, and are expressing animosity and suspicion toward those on the other side of the aisle.

Here is the mistake we have made that we discussed in part 1 — for a very long time the church has struggled to teach consistently and effectively about how we are supposed to act in the public square and the political world. We are not agents of love and reconciliation, voices of reason and grace, known for charity and vision, among our neighbors in the public square.

And at some point we — as Christians— have to be present in American political culture apart from our advocacy of certain specific issues on the left and on the right.

For some people, a conservative Christian presence in politics can't be boiled down to ONLY the quest to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and defense of specific liberties, as legitimate as those concerns may be.

And for some other people, a liberal Christian presence in politics can't be reduced ONLY to opposition to capital punishment and taxing the rich in favor of the poor, as legitimate as those concerns may be.

We need to do better. But hear me — this is not a call to the middle. That'd be a conflation and misstep.

As Anglican theologian Sam Alberry notes, "Christ is too liberal for conservatives and too conservative for liberals. But he is also too conservative for conservatives and too liberal for liberals. We mustn't assume he's always somewhere in the middle of where we all are."

Are we prepared to lift high that Jesus, the one who makes us *all uncomfortable and agitated in our own ways, yet the King of the world who promises the shalom we so desperately need?*

As we saw in the first part of the series, like Jesus in his response to a spiritually corrupt leadership class who would want to trap him into dangerous "binary" choices — the Kingdom of Heaven always presents us with surprising and imaginative paths, if we are open to them!



So again we say, let the fall of 2020 be a marking moment. An altar of turnaround. A moment in time where we turn the ship around with our repentance and obedience. Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. As citizens of our nation. As citizens of our community.

In his letter to Christians living in Rome, the capital city of a pagan empire, the Apostle Paul writes these words:

Let everyone be subject to governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established . . . For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. (Romans 13:1-4)

Paul is telling us that government is a good idea, and part of God's plan for human flourishing.

He goes on to say that the government exists to preserve order and promote the common good. He is NOT saying that God approves of every ruler or regime; simply that government exists for good purposes. I think most of us would agree that a government, even an imperfect one, is better than anarchy.

Paul doesn't stop there. He not only affirms the government. He goes on to affirm politics.

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue. If respect, then respect. If honor, then honor. (Romans 13:6-7)

Now it's not uncommon to hear Christians — like others — say they want nothing to do with politics. But Paul doesn't allow us that option. He fully expects, and is equipping, the early Christians to not only be under the full allegiance of Jesus but also a set of contributing, helpful, servant-minded, civically minded people who hold power to account on all levels.

As an example of Paul living this principle out, consider when he took the Phillipian authorities to account for their abuse of power in Acts 16:35-40. Because Paul loved the Phillipian people, and he loved justice — he wanted to ensure the authorities would not abuse them upon his departure.

Politics is simply the activity of governing. Simply imagining and executing on a vision for a society. Specifically it's the interactivity of leaders and citizens with one another for the common good. When Paul tells us to pay taxes and honor our leaders, he's telling us to be engaged with government; to participate; to be stewards of the political freedoms and resources and relationships we have been given.

Now those are the general principles for us as Christians, set out in our governing text — the Bible — 2000 years ago.



But 2000 years ago Paul was speaking into the politics and government of that pagan empire. And while the Roman Empire was distinguished in certain ways from other governments of the day, it — had little in common with the democratic republic of the US we live in.

There was no participation in government, other than just following the rules of appointed leaders and paying taxes.

Let's put that in the most direct way possible . . . As a citizen, you couldn't vote. So you couldn't have any direct influence on the leaders that governed you, and on the laws you were subject to. And you had no "Bill of Rights."

Fundamentally, the rules of the game and the terms of engagement are just different now.

So as with so many other principles of our faith that were articulated in a different culture and circumstance than ours — we have to figure out what these principles say about how we are to conduct ourselves in the situation we find ourselves today.

What happened in another governing document, 244 years ago, changed everything about the rules of government and politics.

Aside from some Christian texts, these words are among the most famous in history.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Here we find, for the first time in human history, the concept articulated in a governing document that "all are created equal" — yes, an ideal our founders in many ways stood condemned and fell short of from day 1, but also markedly different from everything that had come before it.

For many thousands of years, the world was principally comprised of tribal cultures, where, more or less, everyone lived nearly all their lives in the same "people category." That certainly didn't ensure legal equality given class, caste, and aristocratic systems, but it did ensure that for the most part, you were all of the same homogeneous group, with the same core values.

When different "people categories" encountered one another, or when people with conflicting interests in the same category encountered each other, the typical interaction was some imposition of raw power on one another. At some point along the way, governments were organized to apply more rational rules to minimize the extent to which all conflicts of interest were addressed only through the use of brute force.

But until the Declaration, all governments had discriminated among people categories. There was no aspiration to do otherwise; it was just the way the systems were constructed.

In the Declaration, for the first time in human history, the governing principle is that we are all equal.



And where did that concept come from? It came from our Christian tradition and principles!

The framers took the anchoring principles discussed in the first part of the series:

- That we are all made in God's image.
- That our neighbors are to be loved as ourselves — no matter the people category, skin color, ethnicity, or political commitment.

And applied them to fundamentally innovate on the very form of human government — for the first time in history.

Innovation inspired by the teachings of Jesus — this is something that we can be very excited about and inspired by.

Our tradition. Our beliefs. Our Biblical convictions. Transforming the world, because over the centuries, some variant of our democratic government — the first — has been adopted in over 150 countries.

But before we get too giddy, like everything in life, this is complicated, and the founders were — as all of us are— broken people.

This supposed anchoring principle was set against the real lived experience of women, who were largely excluded by these promises of the Declaration. Also, slaves and Native Americans (and no doubt others) were of course entirely excluded, creating a cruel and tragic irony.

On the one hand, in the Declaration we had the greatest governing aspiration ever articulated.

On the other, we had the on-the-ground realities of harsh and barbarous inequality.

Thomas Jefferson, the acclaimed author of the Declaration text and a notorious slave owner, himself recognized this conflict when he observed the following in 1781: *“Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.”*

So there's much to be inspired by — as Martin Luther King said, the words of the Declaration created a promissory note that the freedoms of all would eventually be secured — but the realities of the founders' frailties and failures should be sobering and humbling as well.

And as we think about how we are to engage in the politics of our day — this insight about our founding and early days should sober and humble us — no one is perfect — no group is perfect.

And no party or leader or set of policies or governing prescriptions is perfect.

No matter what your political commitments are at the moment, if you step back, you know in your bones that this is right.



At some points in our history — at some points in our recent history — at some points now, our political parties and our leaders have gotten it wrong.

They've failed us as leaders. They've failed us morally.

In the words of Tony Evans, the great Dallas, Texas minister — this is why we all need to be Kingdom Independents.

Not literally Independent — you can do what you need to do in terms of political affiliation, that is between you and your conscience and God — but ultimately your commitment needs to be to God's Kingdom.

And that means you have to see that temporary political systems and temporary political leaders and temporary political platforms — can not and should not divide us — because we have a true King, and we have Kingdom rules.

Now, this radical form of new government brought with it an entirely new social compact — the obligation of citizens to act morally and virtuously — or it just doesn't work!!!

For the most part, in prior forms of government, power came “top down” — if you were out of step with the prescribed behaviors, the ruler would crack down on you, using the powers they had.

In our system, power comes — at least in part and in concept, from the “bottom up”.

Speaking into that reality, in a very well-known statement from another of our insightful but complicated founders (and long-time rival of Jefferson), John Adams said:

Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

While that part is pretty famous — the following is less well-known.

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion.

And how about this very vivid image he follows that up with?

Avarice, ambition, revenge . . . Would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net.

The whole American compact — our “deal” — requires moral and religious people — with the rights come a huge responsibility to act with what are effectively Christian principles in our interaction together.



Sure — you can call the principles required for the republic something other than Christian principles if you want — and in a pluralistic country of many beliefs if I wasn't speaking to the church I might — but effectively, this is just semantics.

Let me ask you a question here . . . What group of people — out of all the groups of people out there — should we have the greatest expectation and highest hopes of acting with Christian principles?

Would it be those who don't believe expressly in our principles?

A modest proposal here — how about Christians?!

How about Christians, living out the principles we discussed in the first part of our series — people living as Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven?!

When times are most challenging, it is good to recall the spiritual journeys and public lives of our greats — who arguably faced even greater challenges in their day.

Think of Martin Luther King, and his vision of ending our systemic injustice and achieving his dream of a land of truly free and equal people, Frederick Douglass, battling to end slavery (and perhaps most perversely and challenging to our own convictions today, deep Christian support in many quarters for slavery), and Abraham Lincoln, and his vision for restoring our country.

The vision of each was eventually validated, although tragically through tremendous cost to the country, their families and themselves. In the case of Lincoln and King, it required the sacrifice of their own lives.

Each was deeply informed by our Christian principles and their application in the public square, and each also had a strong view of the significance of America to the world for both the day they lived in and for the future.

We could draw from a range of insights from any of them, speaking into the challenges and possible solutions in this American moment, and it would almost invariably be fitting. You have a hard time going wrong with all these guys!

But I will go with Lincoln, who bookended the Civil War with two remarkable Inaugural addresses. Each reflected his effort to awaken Americans to their truest selves and the profound idea that we are to live fully together — all consistent with the Christian principles “genetically coded” into our founding documents.

In his first Inaugural address on the eve of the Civil War, Lincoln offered this encouragement to the nation:



“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

For four long years the country was torn apart by the war, which resulted in over one million casualties and nearly seven hundred thousand deaths. To put that loss of life into perspective — in order for us to experience a proportionate loss in today’s US population of approximately 330 million people—would require seven million deaths and ten million total casualties.

Against that backdrop, Lincoln’s exhortations to find our “better angels” and that “we are not enemies, but friends” must have been unbelievably bitter and painful.

And yet as the war wound to its close—just weeks before its end and his own assassination — Lincoln pressed on with a similar vision for the broken nation:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Malice toward none! Charity to all! Bind up the nation’s wounds! Care for the widow and orphans!

Does that sound a little like Micah 6:8 — where we are instructed to “*act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?*”

And does that also sound like Jesus, channeling the amazing words of Isaiah in Luke 4:18 — “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.*”

Friends, these are the words of the freedom of our faith.

- In the Old Testament, in Micah, the tracks to change the world were being laid.
- With the coming of Jesus and his sacrifice and new commandment, the world was turned upside down, and a revolutionary new freedom took hold.
- And then these principles of freedom were adopted by our greatest leaders to renew our nation, and give

Encouragement to a world and nation, fitting in any season!

How about now, in this moment, in this season?

Just as the founders faced their Disruptive moment with innovation in governing, more aligned with Christian principles, and our principles of freedom, than governments that had preceded it.



And King and Douglass and Lincoln faced their Disruptions with innovations to greater align us with those same principles of freedom.

How do we innovate in this Great Disruption, to get us more aligned with the principles of the God of the universe, to speak freedom to our burdened land?

In this Great Disruption moment, we as a nation and people are in peril.

If you look around carefully, you will find people in your state in peril, people in your city or town in peril, and in all likelihood people in your closest community of friends and loved ones in peril. You may find yourself in peril already or, because we are all linked together, likely to be in some peril soon.

What stands in the way of our living our Kingdom principles — seeing all made in the image of God, recognizing we need each other, loving our neighbors as ourselves?

Perhaps it is fear, more than anything.

Fear of what? Loss, for so many of us. We fear loss of control, the loss of opportunity, for ourselves or for our children, the loss of our culture, loss of the country we knew or the country we hoped we would be.

A very prominent national leader — someone you would know, and a woman of great faith — recently shared her experience of that fear of loss with me, that is burdening her.

She is deeply afraid her children (she is older, approximately 70) won't have the experience of living in the country she knew.

And hearing her speak about this — though I tried to dissuade her from her fear and encourage her — was heart-breaking.

She is burdened. She is weighed down. She is paralyzed.

And I feel for her — my heart aches — in that tragic burden and pain.

You see, white people, in this case a conservative white woman — tend to fear what *might* happen.

People of color fear what has happened before (it isn't theory, it's history), or what is happening now, and that white people might not care about changing it.

Did you see that amazing Doc Rivers video clip just a few weeks ago? After the Kenosha, Wisconsin shooting of Jacob Blake, the great NBA coach of the last couple decades broke down in tears.



Doc, a tremendous player in his day, an amazing coach (he won a championship for my Boston Celtics) is as all great coaches are, a strong man, and a leader of men. So he doesn't break down easily — I have followed him for many decades now, and I have never seen it.

And he comes from a first responder family — his Dad was a police officer — and he explained that he loves cops, he believes in cops, he doesn't want to defund the police.

But we have to do better, he said.

And in the most touching sequence, when he broke down and the tears came — he said:

We've been hung, we've been shot. And all you do is keep hearing about fear.

(Doc is talking about the fear of conservative white people here.)

It's amazing to me why we keep loving this country and this country does not love us back."

My heart breaks for Doc and the many people like Doc — I haven't been able to think about this moment and these words over the last month without my own tears.

For all of us, there is fear — fear of the unknown.

I am here to declare that while this is natural and human and understandable, this is a device of our spiritual adversary, and it is to be rejected.

The Lords of this world — those who run our political parties and run the fear-peddling media — will prey on our fear.

Our Lord told us time, and time again — Fear not. Fear not!

And the love of God — the defining dimension of who we are as people of faith — casts out fear!

And if we do not live in fear, but live in the “love our neighbors as ourselves” command of our Lord . . . We can channel the transformative power of those who have gone before us.

Like Lincoln applied to his moment — at the end of a Civil War! — let us apply that to this moment.

As we face these times, we are not enemies; we are friends. We are not just black or white or Latino or Asian — we are Americans. We are not just Right or Left — we are Americans. We are not just male or female; academically smart, mechanically brilliant, or developmentally challenged; rich or poor — we are Americans. We are not just Republican, Democrat, Green, Libertarian, or Independent; Red state, Blue state, or Purple state; Christian, Muslim, Jew — we are all Americans!



It will take courage to overcome your fear, as it always does. All the greatest stories require courage from us, and the greater the story, the more courage required.

Yet if we can press on with a dose of courage and play our parts, recollecting our Christian principles and our foundational principles — we will bring new innovation to the disruption of the moment.

And once again — as our heroes of faith have done before in this nation — we can transform our country and bring us more into alignment with our principles, which are at the end of the day — the principles of the Kingdom of heaven.