

Praise for  
***NOT IN IT TO WIN IT***

For as long as I've known Andy Stanley, he has championed the primacy of reaching people as the task of the church. As he often says (quoting James, a first-century leader of the church), "We ought not make it hard for the gentiles who are turning to God." I believe the issues Andy raises in this book are the most pressing questions facing the church right now, and they get at the heart of the Great Commission itself. I invite you to wrestle with them thoughtfully and prayerfully, as I have. If we are to represent Jesus in this generation, we must be people full of grace and truth, and that is no small challenge. Even in places where you come to different conclusions than Andy, you'll be richer for having wrestled through these issues.


**J. D. GREEAR**, pastor of The Summit Church


Andy is "not in it to win it," and I'm in it with Andy and his passion for reaching people far from Jesus. Too many Christians are fighting the wrong battle and warring against the wrong people—you can't wage war on people and reach them at the same time. Andy points us back to the mission Jesus sent us on—showing the love of Jesus to a broken and hurting world. This book is a prophetic call to a confused church, and I hope it is widely engaged and discussed.

**ED STETZER**, dean and professor at Wheaton College

As someone who studies and serves churches around the world, I can confirm it. Attendance in churches is declining. Fewer people, especially in the younger generations, identify as Christians. Churches are more divided than ever. Our world seems more divided than ever. By any measure, we are not winning. But what if we're not winning primarily because we're trying to win? Once again, Andy Stanley helps us reflect on the words of Jesus and challenges us to consider a better way to live our lives and, more importantly, engage God's mission in a broken world.

**TONY MORGAN**, founder and lead strategist of The Unstuck Group, author of *The Unstuck Church*

**NOT**   
**IN IT**   
 **TO**  
  
 **WIN IT**

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**IN IT**   
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 **WIN IT**

**WHY CHOOSING SIDES  
SIDELINES THE CHURCH**

**ANDY STANLEY**

 **ZONDERVAN  
REFLECTIVE**

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*Not in It to Win It*

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*To pastors who refuse to politicize the church and  
have chosen instead to lead their congregations  
through the current political and cultural crisis  
with clarity, boldness, and grace. Press on!*

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When I committed to writing *Not in It to Win It*, one of the first people I called was Ruth Malhotra. I’ve known

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Ruth and her family for many years. Ruth's response was, "Oh my! Are you sure you want to do this?" I assured her I did, but not without her help. She agreed and poured countless hours into research, chapter drafts, the development of illustrations, and dozens of "Are you sure you want to say that?" As grateful as I am for Ruth's editorial partnership, I am grateful to Ruth for another reason as well. She agreed to take on this project during what she considers the most stressful season of her life. On several occasions I gave her an off-ramp to allow her to focus on personal and professional issues that would have more than consumed the average person. But anyone who knows Ruth knows there's nothing average about her. Thank you, Ruth!

This project would never have gotten to the finish line without the focus, attention to detail, and energy of Suzy Gray. But Suzy brought more than her professionalism to this project. Her passion for the topic of this book was inspiring and instructive. And at times, irritating. Who would have the nerve to tell a seasoned author, not to mention one's employer, "I think you should cut that entire chapter. It causes the book to lose momentum." Suzy Gray, that's who. And she was right. And so I did. Suzy, thank you for consistently telling me what I need to hear even when you know I won't want to hear it. Everybody who knows you knows you make everything better.

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Last but first. Sandra. When I told you I felt compelled to weigh in on this topic, you smiled and said, “Okay, if you’re sure.” Which I took to mean, “If you’re going there, I’m going with you.”

Other than me, only you know the crazy that gravitates in our direction when I step out to address concerns we both agree need to be addressed. No one feels the weight of the criticism that comes my way like you do. You carry it well, with dignity and grace. How many times have you taken my hand and said, “If they knew you, they wouldn’t say things like that about you.” The best decision of my life was asking you to marry me. Everyone who knows you agrees.



## INTRODUCTION

# UNPRECEDENTED

### 2020

A pandemic that created an economic shutdown that left us teetering on financial meltdown while navigating social unrest during an election year.

It was my first time.

Yours too.

No instructions, mentors, or maps. We were on our own. But we weren't alone.

Those of us in leadership felt the weight of responsibility in ways most of us were unprepared for. People were looking to us for even a morsel of clarity amid demoralizing uncertainty.

I certainly felt that pressure. I felt it as a parent, a pastor, and an employer.

The year 2020 brought out the best and the worst in us. It exposed weaknesses and showcased strengths. It slowed

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us down in some arenas and forced us to speed up to keep up in others. According to Scott Galloway, author of *Post Corona: From Crisis to Opportunity*, the pandemic was an accelerant. “Take any trend—social, business, or personal—and fast-forward ten years.”<sup>1</sup>

No wonder we were exhausted.

Throughout 2020 I encouraged the folks in our congregations to *write a pandemic story they would be proud to tell*. I would ask, “When 2020 is nothing but a story you tell, what story do you want to tell? A story of panic, fear, selfishness? Or a story of faith, compassion, fidelity, generosity?” I would remind them, “You’re writing your pandemic story one decision and one response at a time. Write a good one!”

Sadly, many evangelicals did *not* write a good one.

## DISCOVERY ZONE

When life is predictable, it’s natural to lose sight of what we value most, what we fear most. But when a tsunami of uncertainty rolls in, things get real, real quick. Uncertainty doesn’t alter our value system. It exposes it. Without any effort on our part, what’s *really* most important surfaces immediately. In seasons of uncertainty, we discover what we value most. Uncertainty and the fear that follows close behind strip away the veneer and reveal what’s hidden beneath the surface.

In 2020 evangelicals in America discovered what we

value most. The political, social, economic, and health crises of 2020 didn't cause us to misprioritize our values. These events simply exposed what's been true for a long time. While our *actions* don't always tell the whole story, our *reactions* most certainly do. The reactions of prominent pastors, Christian podcasters, television personalities, and nonprofit leaders to the events that defined 2020 revealed the disturbing reality lurking beneath Bible-laced rhetoric, faith claims, books, music, and sermons for a long time. Turns out what we say is most important is not actually what we consider most important.

Our responses to 2020 made that abundantly clear. Even worse, our responses to the events of 2020 made our values *embarrassingly* clear.

People were watching.

Listening.

Consequently, folks who don't embrace our faith discovered what's most important to us as well. And while *we* may be surprised by what 2020 revealed about us, they aren't. They suspected it all along. Our response to the events of 2020 simply confirmed their suspicions—namely, that once you scratch off the veneer of our sermons and songs, we value what everybody else does.

And what does the evangelical church in America value most?

Winning.

What do we fear?

Losing.

Not winning or losing souls. We systematically alienated more than half the souls in America through our un-Christlike rhetoric and fear-based posturing. For all our talk of evangelism, revival, and reaching the lost, clearly those are not our primary concerns. That's not what we value most. If it were, we would not have allowed ourselves to be dragged into and embroiled in far less noble conflicts with far less noble goals. If evangelism and discipleship were truly most important, we would not have so easily surrendered influence with those who need to be evangelized and discipled. We would not have allowed ourselves to be reduced to a voting bloc. A constituency. Part of the electorate. Pawns.

Tragically, because of our misplaced, un-Christlike value system . . . our love affair with winning . . . we were not prepared or positioned to take advantage of what, in hindsight, may have been the greatest opportunity for the church in our lifetime—an opportunity when, to borrow the apostle Paul's words, we had a chance to *shine* like stars in the heavens, to live like “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, to use Paul's words again, we *grumbled* and *argued*. With one another. With our neighbors. With state and local governments. To use Jesus's words, we had an opportunity to let our “light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”<sup>3</sup>

Instead, we hid our light under a bushel. We lined up behind our political party of choice and leveraged our sacred

text to validate our political talking points. We argued with our brothers and sisters and treated our neighbors with suspicion. We went to war with state and local officials over our *right to gather* . . . shoulder to shoulder . . . indoors . . . in the middle of a pandemic. We left the impression that our personal faith would suffer irreversible harm if we couldn't meet indoors every seven days. On social media we demonized and criticized, by name, people we'd never met. We gave up the moral high ground and confirmed what my kids' generation has suspected for some time—namely, we don't actually believe what we claim to believe. Our rhetoric and our responses say otherwise.

We allowed ourselves to be divided over masks and vaccines. Perhaps the apex of the insanity being that not an insignificant number of evangelical Christian leaders considered—and still consider—COVID vaccines the *mark of the beast*.

I'm still looking for the beast.

Indiscriminate demonization of entire people groups was considered an exercise in virtue. After all, we were standing up for the truth!

We would not be intimidated!

We were fighting the good fight.

We were in it to *win* it!

Toward the end of 2020, as the prospects of winning politically and culturally began to slip away, many high-profile evangelical church leaders behaved as rudely and as un-Christlike as their secular counterparts. In some

instances, worse. In their attempt to save America from the other political party, they lost their opportunity to save half the American population from their sin. Consequently, we all lost influence. We all lost credibility.

Then the candidate backed by the majority of evangelicals lost the election.

## PRONOUNS

If you're confused or offended by my use of a collective *we*, I get it. After all, *we*'ve never met, so what right do I have to assume you took part in or condoned any of this? And doesn't *we* include me?

Yes.

I've chosen my pronoun on purpose because if you're a Jesus follower, you are included in *we*. And you are a part of *we* because *we* are one—one body united by one Savior and one baptism. I may not know you, but I can't do without you. You may not like me, but you need me and are connected to me. The apostle Paul thought so anyway. When Paul used the body analogy to describe the highly dysfunctional church in Corinth, he did not give anyone the choice to opt out. He did just the opposite: "Now you *are* the body of Christ, and each one of you *is* a part of it."<sup>4</sup>

Implication: You're all one whether you like it or not and whether you like one another or not.

*They were a we.*

And so are we.

As much as I would like to differentiate and distance myself from the behavior of some parts of the body, I can't. And neither can you. And that's okay, considering what else Paul wrote about this uncomfortable arrangement: "God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body."<sup>5</sup>

Who put us together?

According to Paul, God did. And he did it so that there would be . . . wait for it . . . *no division*. Like your physical body, each part of the church body "should have *equal concern* for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it."<sup>6</sup>

So there's no room for you versus me. Like it or not, like me or not, there's just *we*. If you sprain your ankle, the other parts of your body don't look the other way or post about your ankle on social media. They don't blame; they engage. They come to the rescue. When one part of your physical body suffers, the entire body suffers.

So this is a *we* problem. And *we* must address it.

The problem I'm referring to—the Achilles' heel in modern evangelicalism—is our obsession with winning. It's a fatal weakness because even a cursory reading of the Gospels and the letters of Paul make one thing abundantly clear. The church is not here to win. Just the opposite. By every human measure, our Savior *lost*.

On purpose.

With a purpose.

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And *we* are his body.

So, like our Savior, we are not in it to win it. We are in it for something else entirely.

That something else is what this book is about.

**PART**   
**ONE**

 **MY**  
**2020**

# BATTLE OF THE BUCKETS

**D**ifference is inevitable. Division is a choice.

Our nation chose poorly.

The church followed suit.

In our current cultural climate, there are no neutral topics or neutral people. Everything and everybody is politicized and forced to fit neatly into one of two buckets.

A red one or a blue one.

This isn't new. Political polarization has been a national reality for decades. But during 2020, the messy but often productive middle ground all but disappeared. As a result, Americans were pressured to move further right or further left or be left behind.

Lines were drawn where lines were deemed unnecessary in the past.

Everything became a point of contention. School closings. School openings. Masks. Protests. And, of course, Anthony Fauci. Republicans loved him. Then Democrats claimed him.

With the collapse of the middle, nuance left the building.

#### 4 ➔ My 2020

Without nuance, comments are taken more literally than intended, and productive discussion around complex topics becomes virtually impossible. The result: you're for me or you're against me. It's all or nothing. But every adult knows the world doesn't work that way. Nothing works that way. That way of thinking ensures that things *won't* work.

But, as every political pundit knows, "all or nothing" sells. "All or nothing" gets votes. It's a donation magnet. A brand builder.

People should know better. Christians in particular.

Unfortunately, and to the point of this book, churches, church leaders, and prominent pastors (along with high-profile leaders of faith-based organizations) took their cues from culture and vacated the middle. To our shame they added their voices to those of their secular counterparts. Not wanting to be left out—and certainly not left behind—we entered the partisan fray. We did what everyone else was doing, pretty much the way they were doing it. We sided publicly with a party and a candidate—and defended both regardless.

In short, we forgot what it means to be Christian.

In the first century, *Christian* was a political term, not a religious one. First-century followers of Jesus weren't branded Christian to differentiate them from Zeusians or Jupiterians. The term *Christian* was coined based on Latin political terminology. Christian was analogous to other political associations such as *Caesariani*, a follower of Caesar; *Herodiani*, a follower of Herod; or later,

*Neroniani*, a follower of Nero.<sup>1</sup> Non-Christians in Antioch, where the term *Christian* was first coined, viewed followers of Jesus as *political partisans* of a king. In time, to be called Christian would mark a man or woman as anti-Roman, not anti-religious. Christians were viewed as threats to the state not because of what they *believed*. Christians were viewed as threats to the state because of who they chose to *obey*.

Rome had little interest in which god or gods people chose to worship. Their concern was political. Imperial. People were allowed their many gods.

But only one king.

Rome's mandate was unambiguous:

Worship your Christ.

Obey Caesar.

Separating sacred from secular was not an issue for idol-worshipping pagans. But for Christians, it was a nonstarter. Jesus was a king who required his subjects to obey him rather than worship him. In the book of Acts, *Christian* is found exclusively on the lips of critics.<sup>2</sup> It was a slur, an insult.

Imagine that.

In the first century, no one asked Christians if they were Christian.

They were *accused* of it.

It was *evident*.

## 6 → My 2020

It was evident because of how they *behaved*. Their behavior underscored fidelity to a king.

### NOT SO EVIDENT

In 2020 what has been true for some time became evident. We have reduced our faith to faith. Believing is enough. Which leaves us free to pack up our static beliefs, our internalized religion, and run to our political corners of choice. As a result, many, perhaps most, Christians feel more comfortable with and feel they have more in common with people who share their political views than people who share their Christian faith. This is almost always the case when Christianity is reduced to *faith*. But a Christian faith reduced to belief is a faith neither Jesus nor the apostle Paul would have recognized.

When Christianity is reduced to belief, we lose our voice. We lose our distinction. We're easily reduced to a constituency, a voting bloc that can be wined, dined, lied to, and bribed. By reducing Christianity to a pagan bifurcation of sacred and secular, we've abandoned our opportunity—our responsibility—to serve as the conscience of the nation. Once the church relegated Jesus to the role of *forgiver of our sins* rather than *King of our lives*, we opened the door to lesser kings. Thrones never remain empty long.

Consequently, unlike the original Christians, *nobody is accusing us of being members of the party of Christ*.

No politician anywhere is frustrated with the stubborn

Christians in their district who refuse to align themselves publicly with their party and insist instead on behaving like their Lord. Refusing to submit our lives to the Jesus of the Gospels sets us up to be seduced to believe that by leveraging, perfecting, and baptizing the tools and tactics used by the kingdoms of this world, we can further the cause of Christ. Boycotts, voter guides, protests, suing state and local governments, calling out politicians by name from the pulpit—these are the new spiritual disciplines. And if implemented consistently, with God’s help, we can take our country back! We can win!

Which would be fantastic if the win really was winning. But Jesus didn’t come to win the way we define *win*.

He came to lose. And he invited us to follow him.

We’re not in it to win it. We’re here for something else. Something the apostle Paul understood the moment he regained his sight. Something Jesus followers in Antioch understood and embraced. Something that changed the world. Something that could change the world again.

## WINNING AT WINNING

The apostle Paul defined his win. In doing so, he defined ours as well.

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to *everyone*, to *win* as many as possible.<sup>3</sup>

## 8 → My 2020

A slave to *everyone*? Really, Paul? Even members of the other political party? A slave to people you disagree with? Seriously?

It's important to remember that Paul wasn't asking gentiles to recognize the next step in God's unfolding story of redemption. He was asking them to abandon their entire worldview! He wasn't asking folks to add another idol to the mantle. Following Jesus would require them to empty the mantle and destroy their images. Including . . . including household deities linked to the centuries-old tradition of ancestor worship. "Sorry, Granddad. I'm a Christian now. Into the fire you go!"

He continues:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.<sup>4</sup>

What a coward.

Poser.

Pretender.

Come on, Paul. Choose a position! You can't stand in the middle. You're either hot or you're cold. Are you

afraid of losing followers? Are you trying to have it both ways?

Those were sentiments communicated by a good many conservative church folks toward their pastors in the months leading up to the last election. Pastors, like me, who refused to politicize our churches despite intense pressure and criticism. Our refusal to take a *side* was interpreted as refusal to take a *stand*—though, in fact, we *had* taken a stand. We were correctly and courageously refusing to politicize the *ekklesia* of Jesus. We were demonstrating our commitment to the Great Commission. We refused to alienate half our community by siding with one political party over the other. We chose to stand with Jesus in the messy middle, where problems are solved, rather than capitulate to divisive, broad-brush political talking points.

It's difficult to take a Christlike stand when pressured to choose a political side. It's hard to follow Paul's example when so many in the church prefer we simply preach like pundits. Still, like the apostle Paul, many courageous, gospel-centered pastors weren't in it to win an election. They were in it to win *people*. They weren't in it to save America.

They were in it to save Americans.

Americans on both sides as well as those on no side of the political divide. They were accused of being fearful when, in fact, they were remaining faithful, despite pressure from deacons, elders, and donors to do otherwise.

I faced—and continue to face—my share of criticism.

## 10 → My 2020

Dozens of families reached out to let me know they were leaving our churches because I had bought into the Democratic narrative. When was I going to take a stand? What was I afraid of?

It was disappointing. Discouraging. But no one threatened to feed me to wild animals or substitute me for a tiki torch.

For the record, Paul's stubborn refusal to take a side *then* is why his letters are available to us and are relevant for us *now*. His willingness to stand alone against unimaginable pressure to do otherwise is why his letters and his story shaped Western civilization. What he writes next is one of my favorite statements in the New Testament. It's his mission and strategy statement. First his strategy:

I have become all things to all people . . .<sup>5</sup>

Translated: I'm a spy! I do whatever is necessary to blend in with my surroundings. I work hard not to blow my cover. I've learned to build and navigate relationships with people I have virtually nothing in common with.

But why? Sounds like a lot of work.

. . . so that by all possible means . . .<sup>6</sup>

*All* possible means. Gotta love that. Whatever it takes. Including being misunderstood and mistreated. Then he

lays out his mission. His Great Commission–informed mission:

. . . so that by all possible means I might *save* some.<sup>7</sup>

Paul was forced to navigate the narrow space between three opposing worldviews: (1) first-century Judaism, (2) an empire that assumed its power was by divine design, and (3) local pagan deities scattered throughout the empire—each of which had long histories that galvanized a worldview fueled mostly by superstition and fear.

He had his work cut out for him. There were three buckets, and he didn't fit in any of them.

It's amazing anything Paul did or wrote survived his lifetime. But it did. It did in part because he refused to subjugate his calling and convictions to the prevailing worldviews and power structures. Paul believed YHWH had done something new in the world, for the world, in spite of everything going on around the world. And he was convinced he held the moral and ethical high ground despite being virtually alone in that conviction. He didn't feel compelled to win. Because of what Jesus had done, he'd already won. The world had won. Someone just needed to tell 'em. So Paul set out to do just that.

Paul didn't align himself with the temple, the empire, or with any local priesthood. His willingness to stand apart, to stand alone, positioned him to become the most effective advocate of our faith who has ever lived.

## FINDING COMMON GROUND

Paul was brilliant and instructive in his ability to find and leverage common ground with both Jews and pagans. But he never—as in never, ever—leveraged the gospel or the teaching of Jesus to further their agendas. His was a message for people on both sides of all aisles.

To the pagans in Athens, he declared:

In the *past* God overlooked such ignorance, but *now* he commands all people everywhere to repent.<sup>8</sup>

God had been patient with their pagan ways. They hadn't known any better. But that was then. This is now. Something new had transpired. Someone new had come. And he had come for the benefit of all people.

To Jews and gentiles in Galatia, he wrote:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

This statement was more scandalous than we have time to unpack here. But the point remains: Paul called people *out*.

He did not align himself *with*.

He called people out of their old identities, away from embedded cultural categories. He invited people to leave something behind and adopt something new. Brand stand-alone

new. Something so different, so new, it could not be blended with, subjugated to, or co-opted by any agenda other than the intended agenda of its founder. Maintaining his rather lonely position outside any of the prevailing worldviews enabled Paul to build common ground and launch communities of faith. And what fueled his laser-focused mission? He tells us:

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the *gospel*, that I may share in its blessings.<sup>10</sup>

Let's do that.

Again.

## SAVING AMERICA

When a local church becomes preoccupied with saving *America* at the expense of saving *Americans*, it has forsaken its mission. When church leaders embrace and grow comfortable with save-*America* rhetoric that alienates some *Americans*, they are derelict in their duty. When pastors and churches intentionally or unintentionally subjugate winning people to winning elections, they've already lost.

Even if they win.

The excitement and enthusiasm politically active and aligned congregations experience is not the spirit of God. It's not the spirit of God because they are no longer in sync with the mission of God. Jesus was clear on this point when

he commissioned his first-century followers. He charged his earliest followers with a monumental task that came prepackaged with monumental promise. He concluded his Great Commission with a *conditional* promise that we've gotten in the habit of quoting as if it has no conditions.

Surely I am with *you* always, to the very end of the age.<sup>11</sup>

Who is the *you* included in the *I am with you*?

This *you* extended beyond the folks in his immediate audience. After all, Jesus suggests there would be *yous* making disciples to the very end of the age. So who is *you*? Whom did Jesus promise to be *with*, work *through*, contend *for*?

This promise is promised exclusively to those who prioritize his priority.

Believers whose primary ambition is to make disciples of all nations. Believers who are willing to navigate and maintain relationships with all kinds of people in order to “save some” and “win some.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus followers who embrace a “by all possible means” mindset.

The church or church leader who publicly aligns with a political party has relinquished their ability to make disciples of half their own nation, much less all nations. Intentionally—or even unintentionally—aligning a local church with a party or candidate is an insurmountable obstacle to making disciples of those in the other party. Doing so alienates half the population.

The church or church leader who aligns with a political party is disqualified from Jesus's "you." If that describes you, that should concern you. It certainly concerns me.

So, one more time.

With feeling.

Saving *America* is not the mission of the church.

The moment our love or concern for country takes precedence over our love for the people in our country, we are off mission. When saving America diverts energy, focus, and reputation away from saving Americans, we no longer qualify as the *ekklesia* of Jesus. We're merely political tools. A manipulated voting demographic. A photo op. Again, we lose our elevated position as the conscience of the nation. We give up the moral and ethical high ground. As Tim Keller writes,

“When the church as a whole is no longer seen as speaking to questions that transcend politics, and when it is no longer united by a common faith that transcends politics, then the world sees strong evidence that Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx were right, that religion is really just a cover for people wanting to get their way in the world.”<sup>13</sup>

In the months leading up to the 2020 election, politicized congregations and church leaders overplayed their hands. It was painfully obvious they wanted to “get their way in the world.” Yes, they had Bible verses to support their

desire to “get their way in the world.” But one thing they did not have was the support of their Savior.

Now, in case you’re wondering, yes, I love my country. Deeply. But when I die, I won’t go to Washington, DC. Neither will you. And neither will your neighbors or their kids. The issue is not patriotism. The issue is priority. As a reminder, every time you place your hand over your heart and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, you declare the priority I’m advocating for:

“One Nation under God”

God first.

Nation second.

Our ultimate allegiance is to a King who came to reverse the order of things—the King who rather than requiring his subjects to die for him, died for them instead.

That’s a better King.

And our uncompromising devotion to our better King will ultimately make America a better nation.

## THEY DON’T MIX

I didn’t want to, nor did I have time to, write this book. But my heart is broken over the division—not in our nation but in the church.

Division.

Division is the very thing Jesus was most concerned

about<sup>14</sup>—the thing we seem completely *unconcerned* about. Truth is, we've fostered and fueled division by allowing recent political and cultural mayhem to distract us from what our Savior commanded us to do. Consequently, our primary concerns often mirror the concerns of our political party of choice rather than our Savior of choice. And what concerns your political party most? The same thing the other party is most concerned about: winning.

When winning replaces following, we're able to sanctify all manner of un-Jesus-like means to justify that end. We become quick to speak and slow to think. We criticize unbelievers for behaving like unbelievers. We criticize other believers without talking to them first. We rebrand slander as truth-telling. We claim, defend, and sue to ensure that our rights take priority over defending the rights of others. We believe the worst. We rejoice when our enemies stumble. Saving America takes precedence over loving the American next door. And, given enough time, we can produce chapter and verse to support all of it. Actually, given enough time, you can produce chapter and verse to support just about anything.

Perhaps that's why Jesus invited us to follow *him* rather than our *interpretation* of a sacred text. Follow Jesus through the Gospels and you'll find no justification for any of the above.

When winning replaces following, we are no longer following. We are no longer Christian as defined by the folks who originally coined the term.

## THE MIX

We've been told not to mix politics and religion. If by *religion* we're referring to private prayers to and corporate worship of a God who is concerned primarily with private prayers and corporate worship, then, yeah. Don't mix 'em. Actually, you can't mix 'em. They exist in two entirely different realms. One in the real world. One in somebody's imagination.

But if by *religion* we're talking about God becoming flesh and making his dwelling among us and instructing us how to behave? If we're talking about God taking on human flesh so we could understand who he is, what he likes, who he likes, and how we should treat the folks he likes? That's a whole other thing.

That's the invasion of one realm by the other.

That's good news.

That's the kingdom of God come near.<sup>15</sup> That's the kingdom of God come to town.

That's what first-century Jesus followers in Antioch were convinced had happened. And as we will discover, once they were convinced, they did not switch *religions*.

They switched *loyalties*.

They switched *kings*.

And it was evident.

Let's make our allegiance to Jesus *evident* again.

# CULTURE WAR CHRISTIANITY

**M**ost Americans recognize that everything is unnecessarily politicized and polarized. And other than the folks who profit from it, nobody likes it. Nobody likes it because, for the most part, Americans agree on the fundamentals. A September 2020 study by Harvard’s Carr Center for Human Rights shows that eight in ten Americans believe that “without our freedoms America is nothing.”<sup>1</sup> Of those studied, 93 percent say the right to privacy is important, and 92 percent agree that the right to a quality education matters and that racial equality matters. Seven in ten Americans believe they have more in common with one another than not.<sup>2</sup>

So what’s the problem?

What’s fueling the tension and division?

In a word: fear.

Fear is the fuel.

The sad truth is, the fear fueling our division has been created, cultivated, and stoked by those who benefit from it. Fear is profitable. Media companies want engagement and

fear drives engagement. Wannabe leaders need followers. Fear draws followers. Fear-based messaging is nearly twice as effective as messaging that fails to stir that emotion.<sup>3</sup>

Fear is motivating. It motivates us to shut our minds, hearts, and hands. It makes us smaller. More insecure. As Cherie Harder put it, “Dwelling on fear and outrage is spiritually deforming.”<sup>4</sup> It’s spiritually deforming because fear entices us to place our faith in the person, party, or platform that promises to protect us from whatever they’ve convinced us we should fear.

For decades, politicians have played to our deepest fears. The other party, the other candidate, is out to destroy everything we value. The other party doesn’t care about your family or your values. They don’t care about America. And for a donation of twenty-five, fifty, or one hundred dollars, they will protect you, your family, and our great nation.

Nothing divides like politics because nothing divides like fear.

But it’s not just politicians.

Pastors and prominent Christian leaders have done their share of fear-mongering as well. They’ve stoked the imaginations and capitalized on the concerns of their congregants, followers, and mailing list subscribers. They’ve contributed to the image of the godless Democrats and the soulless Republicans. Kristin Du Mez sums it up disturbingly well: “Evangelical militancy is often depicted as a response to fear. . . . But it’s important to recognize that in many cases evangelical leaders actively stoked fear in the

hearts of their followers in order to consolidate their own power and advance their own interests.”<sup>5</sup>

There are three primary psychological responses to fear: fight, flight, or freeze.<sup>6</sup> There’s little money to be raised or influence to be gained with options two and three. But option one? Fight? That’s always a win for those looking to win. After all, what’s the outcome of a fight? A winner. And so we find ourselves embroiled in yet another round of culture wars.

Leading up to the 2020 election, it wasn’t difficult for religious leaders to turn the faithful into culture warriors. With emotions already frayed and fear as the predominant emotion, the fields were ripe for harvest. Add to that the unremitting stream of attack ads clogging our mailboxes and saturating the airways and it took very little effort for church leaders and faith leaders to mobilize their congregants and constituents.

All in Jesus’s name, of course.

For pastors and churches comfortable identifying with the Republican or Democratic Party, the 2020 election cycle was a dream come true. For the rest of us, not so much.

November’s contest gave both sides the opportunity to take the culture war to new intoxicating and toxic levels. The demonization of everyone in the other party was fair game. We heard it from pundits and pastors alike. It was applauded and amened. I listened in horror as a Baptist pastor I’ve known for years made light of then-candidate Joe Biden’s memory during a sermon introduction—a sermon

on renewing the mind. In my home state of Georgia, Republicans were caricatured as heartless racists who wanted to make it illegal to provide water to folks waiting in line to vote. The examples are endless. We all witnessed it. And what we witnessed destroyed our witness. There's no gentle way to say it. Pastors who publicly aligned themselves and their churches with a political party or candidate abandoned their calling, undermined their credibility, and exploited the body of Christ. For them, the end would justify the means. Winning would be worth it. The winner would have the opportunity to determine the direction of our nation for decades to come. So battle lines were drawn. Jesus's name was invoked. And in the end, nobody really won. We still can't agree on who won. The only clear outcome is that the church lost.

The problem with the culture war is that there aren't just winners and losers. There are casualties. When the church takes a leading role in the fray, the casualty is always the faith of the next generation. Their faith is sacrificed on the altar of temporary power and political gain.

## **“THIS FEELS LIKE WAR”**

Culture wars are nothing new, of course, especially when we consider the relatively short history of our nation. University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter coined the phrase *culture wars* in 1991. He explained the origin of the phrase in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*: “As I

was interviewing people back in the '80s and then into the '90s, the activists who were involved in it all said—left and right—this feels like war.”<sup>7</sup>

In his landmark book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, Hunter argues that while Americans hold a wide range of moral commitments and political priorities, they are often portrayed as holding one of two distinct worldviews competing in an epic, unresolvable struggle.

In a culture war, a dispute takes place “between groups who hold fundamentally different views of the world,” writes Hunter. “On all sides the contenders are generally sincere, thoughtful, and well-meaning, but they operate with fundamentally opposing visions of the meaning of America: what it has been, what it is, and what it should be.”<sup>8</sup>

In the 1990s, those on the front lines of the culture wars were evangelical pastors and leaders, many of whom pushed the idea that faithfully following Jesus meant the church must take control of major spheres of influence in society, even if that required aligning with political movements to gain power. Their language was often militaristic. They spoke of “invading enemy territory,” “occupying hostile institutions,” and “taking over secular society” to create “godly change” in America. Instead of viewing culture through the lens of compassionate and winsome engagement, these church leaders saw it as a system to be conquered.

I had a front row seat to this effort.

It's why I'm convinced that not only does this approach

not work, it is antithetical to the mission of the church, Jesus's new-covenant command, and common sense.

As author and commentator David French notes, the culture war approach “often confuses Christian power with biblical justice, and it creates incentives for Christians to not just seek power but to feel a sense of failure and emergency when they are not in positions of cultural or political control.”<sup>9</sup>

What he says next is worth pausing to catch your breath: “Any admonition that declares that we must rule should be checked with the immediate reminder that Christ did not. It is the cross—not the boardroom, not the Oval Office, and not the box office—that is the absolute center of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>10</sup>

Yes, it is.

Jesus did not come to win as we define winning. That's why we're still talking about him, and most Americans couldn't name their senators if their lives depended on it.

## A FUTILE FIGHT!

Fallout from our cultural disputes and quests for power has ranged from minor skirmishes and sound bites to national demonstrations, boycotts, and violent protests. Today, of course, it also includes social media outrage. But the dirty little secret of culture war advocates, both religious and nonreligious, is that they cannot afford to claim victory, or they lose followers and funding. So both

sides claim to be *losing*. That's how they *win*. The entire endeavor is fueled by fear. Both sides of any culture war conflict need an enemy to survive. They need an enemy to exist. This is why Christians and the church in particular should refuse to participate. There is no win because the goal isn't winning—the goal is warring. You *can't* love your enemy in that scenario because you aren't supposed to love your enemy. Conflict *is* the win. There is no middle ground, and there is no room for compromise. This is one of several reasons Jesus refused to take sides in the culture wars of his era.

Washington, DC-based theologian and political theorist Jonathan Leeman contends that when it comes to culture, Jesus followers must neither withdraw nor seek to control, but rather faithfully represent the values of the King we serve. He says,

A losing team becomes desperate and takes desperate measures. But what might it look like for the church's politics if we became convinced—really convinced—both that we will have trouble in this world and that Jesus has overcome this world, as he promised? Might we present a strange and winsome confidence that is not desperate to win the culture wars but is also tenderly and courageously committed to the good of others? . . .

Anyone who tells you, “Withdraw, we're losing!” or, “Push forward, we're winning!” may have

succumbed to a kind of utopianism, as if we could build heaven on earth. Instead, heaven starts in our assemblies, even if only as in a mirror dimly. Christians are heaven's ambassadors, and our churches are its embassies. Neither panic nor triumphalism becomes us. A cheerful confidence does. We represent this heavenly and future kingdom now, whether the skies are cloudy or clear.<sup>11</sup>

## A BETTER ENDEAVOR

There are certainly things worth fighting for. But not as many as we might imagine. Beware the leader who scares you to recruit you to fight for a cause that was previously unknown to you, especially if the recruiter stands to gain from your efforts.

Jesus's refusal to take sides in the culture wars of his day was not because he lacked opinions or conviction. He wasn't afraid to take a stand. Jesus knew what we can't seem to get our heads around: that when the church chooses a side, as defined by any political party, we've sided against people on the other side. In that moment, we elevate our potentially flawed views over people. For Jesus, a *you* always took precedence over a *view*. This drove his friends and adversaries nuts. At times it made him look inconsistent. But he was calculatingly consistent. His purpose precluded him from joining forces with either side of any cultural issue. His refusal to take sides was not out of a lack of concern.