

# A Christian Response to *Idolatry Politics*

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Ambassadors  
of  
Reconciliation™

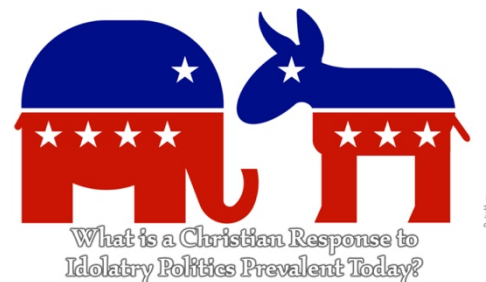
## You Have Heard It Said Before ...

You have heard it said before that to maintain familial harmony, you should avoid the topics of religion and politics at the dinner table. But I encourage you to be salt and light as you discuss *both* (Matthew 5:13-16).

On the weekends I am not traveling for work, I look forward to our Sunday morning Bible class. At my home church this past summer we studied the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Something that captured my attention was a concept Jesus repeats six times in this section; "You have heard it said ... But I say to you ..." Jesus contrasts for his disciples what they would have known from the Torah with the point of his teaching. Each time, Jesus contrasted their prior understanding of the law with the deeper perspective of the heart. Jesus' point? He cares about the heart!

For example, murder is more than just taking a life, it includes being angry and hating a brother (Matthew 5:21-26). It's a matter of the heart. Adultery is more than sexual contact outside of marriage. Adultery also includes lusting after someone (vv 27-30). It's a matter of the heart. Rather than keeping oaths as they had learned, Jesus told his disciples they shouldn't make oaths at all, but to simply let their answer of "yes" or "no" stand (vv 33-37). It's a matter of the heart. Rather than take revenge, Jesus calls his disciples to generosity and naivete (vv 38-42). It's a matter of the heart. Rather than hating our enemies, we are to love and pray for them (vv 43-48). It's a matter of the heart. After Bible class, I continued to ponder Jesus' words "You have heard it said ..."

On evening TV, the pundits, no matter their party affiliation or political bent, talk incessantly about the other side playing *Identity Politics*. It's constant, predictable and entirely unimaginative - mindless. They all have their pet identities they like to attribute to their opponent, including a full catalog of \_\_\_<ists> (e.g. racist, socialist, etc.), \_\_\_<phobes> (e.g. homophobe, xenophobe, etc.) and many others. The name calling is so inventive that more than once I've had to google a term used by a candidate to attack another.



Well, one evening a pundit began his report with, "You've heard it said before ..." Then he went on to describe how one side accused the other of being various shades of \_\_\_<ists> and the response was to blame the accuser of being a variety of \_\_\_<phobes>. Good grief! You need to be a psychologist to keep up with this commentary! The pundit's words at the beginning triggered, once again, my pondering Jesus' words in Matthew, "You have heard it said ..."

I began thinking about what Jesus might say regarding all of these political goings-on. I imagined one way Jesus might respond ...

You've heard it said before that everyone is practicing *Identity Politics* ... But I say to you that what you practice is *Idolatry Politics* ...

Whether it is behavior or motives we are considering, what matters most to Jesus is what is taking place in the heart. This is what I'd like to explore with you.

## ***Identity Politics or Idolatry Politics***

Let's begin with a few definitions. Webster defines *Identity Politics* as "politics in which groups of people having a particular racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity tend to promote their own specific interests or concerns without regard to the interests or concerns of any larger political group." Frankly, this definition is too benign. It doesn't come close to describing what is happening today. There is something more at play. Perhaps *Idolatry Politics*?

Webster doesn't define *Idolatry Politics*, so we need to unpack it ourselves, beginning with idolatry. We recall Old Testament examples of idols such as Baal or Nebuchadnezzar's statue while often overlooking how the New Testament broadens the concept and the practice of idolatry to include matters of the heart:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. (Colossians 3:5 ESV)

Luther defines an idol this way in his Large Catechism: "*A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart. I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.*"<sup>1</sup> While John Calvin is quoted "*The evil in our desire often is not in what we want, but that we want it too much.*"

From Exodus 20, the First Commandment is "You shall have no other gods." Luther explains this to mean that we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. (Psalm 96:4 ESV)

[Jesus said,] 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' (Matthew 22:37 ESV)

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. (Proverbs 3:5 ESV)

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Timothy McCain. Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions: Second Edition. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.

## The Development of an Idol

Both *Conflict Resolution vs Reconciliation*<sup>2</sup> and *Go and Be Reconciled: What Does This Mean?*<sup>3</sup> from Ambassadors of Reconciliation describe how idols develop as illustrated here. Notice how an idol can begin with a godly fear, desire or trust. But, once we demand what we want, the fear, desire, or trust begins to develop into a full-blown idol. We slide down a slippery slope, moving from desire to demand. When expectations are not met, our frustration increases, and we judge those who will not give us what we want. If they continue to refuse us, we punish them.

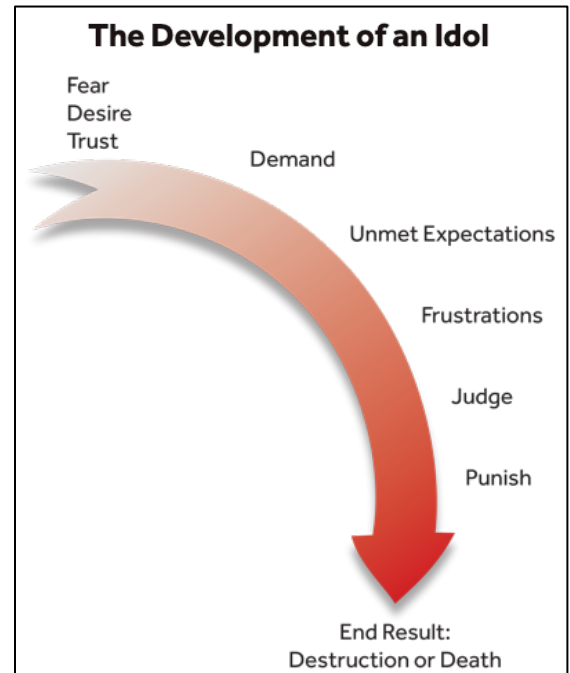
The devil promises good things (i.e. happiness, satisfaction, safety, success, fame, special knowledge, etc.) if we turn our devotion from God and devote ourselves to the idols of our hearts. But this is a powerful and destructive deception!

If left unchecked, idolatry results in destruction or death of the idol and/or the person worshipping it. In other words, idolatry ends in death.

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:14-15 ESV)

This slippery slope is illustrated *every* evening on news or commentary shows covering political issues. The number of examples is staggering. Once you start looking for it, you see it in nearly every story. This slippery slope is also lived out at our dinner tables, whether we are discussing politics or people we know and choose to tear down. Political ideology has become one of the most prominent idols of our culture and time.

Consider any recent political “clash” that made the news. Often apparent is that the principle characters are trying to do what they believe to be best for the country. This is often true, even when we strongly disagree with their approach. If you find yourself condemning someone for their desire, even an ungodly one, then I encourage you to contemplate the slippery slope personally to see if you yourself have already slid down to make such judgements about them. It is simply not our place to condemn someone as evil (see Matthew 7:1-5). We can discern the sin, but we’re still called to love the sinner.



There are contemporary examples where the initial desire is not godly, and Christians should recognize them. One example is the desire to legalize abortion. This desire is counter to Scripture (see Psalm 51:5 – we are a sinful being from conception; Exodus 20:13 – do not murder) so it is a sinful desire from the outset.

<sup>2</sup> Ambassadors of Reconciliation: *Conflict Resolution vs Reconciliation*. [www.aorhope.org](http://www.aorhope.org)

<sup>3</sup> Ambassadors of Reconciliation: *Go and Be Reconciled: What Does This Mean?* [www.aorhope.org](http://www.aorhope.org)

So, when does a godly, honorable desire morph into an idol? The change takes place when the desire turns into a demand in our heart and we're willing to sin to get what we want. This is so natural! Our Old Adam nature takes the very gifts of God - good things for our country, our family, our church, our school or even ourselves - and turns them into a sinful demand – an idol.

Expectations accompany demands. We expect our opponent to yield to our demand. We express these demands in a variety of ways in politics today. Perhaps the most benign expression of these demands is through legislation. The more egregious expressions are via social media and on-camera interviews. Of course, our opponent wants something different than we want and is not ready to yield to our demands, so we get frustrated. What we do with that frustration often highlights the idol(s) in our heart.

Our Old Adam judges our opponent for not giving us what we want. As self-appointed judge and jury, we render this judgement in our heart, condemning them as evil. The condemned deserve punishment! So, we punish. The political landscape is littered with examples of these punishments: anger, lashing-out, name-calling, slander, social media tirades and inevitable responses, smear-campaigns, misrepresentations, etc. Unfortunately, these punishments make up so much of our “news” today.

This behavior is so prevalent, we are desensitized to it. It has become normal. We accept it and justify it. Politicians describe politics as “a contact sport” as justification. Again, accepting it as the norm. But this isn't the worst of it!

Idolatry left unchecked leads to destruction or death of the idol or the person worshiping it (James 1:14-15). Unfortunately, we see examples of this everywhere in our politics today. Most obvious are the heart-wrenching examples of innocent people being killed as seen in senseless mass shootings. Not all are politically motivated, but all of them are evidence of idolatry taken to its logical and destructive conclusion. Less evident, but just as insidious is when relationships are destroyed in the wake of this political idolatry. Family members, friends and colleagues get so mad with one another they no longer speak. Or when they do speak, all they can do is argue.

Politics is routinely described as divisive, but that is simply an innocuous, normalizing label for this idolatry. We like to point to the enemy as “them,” whether it's Republican, Democrat, Liberals, or Conservatives, the \_\_\_<ists>, or the \_\_\_<phobes>. We like to say “they” are causing this division. In reality, by making this claim we have been deceived. When Satan tricks us into believing our opponent is the enemy rather than Satan himself, he's won that battle for our heart.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12 ESV)

I offer a working definition of *Idolatry Politics*: politics resulting from making ourselves, a candidate or cause into an idol in our heart to justify all manner of sinful, ungodly behavior in pursuit of our political goals.

The most prominent idolatry in our discourse today is idolatry of self. We make ourselves to be an idol. We make ourselves to be a god. We do this when we condemn our opponents as evil and pridefully and arrogantly pronounce them as such. We justify ourselves because we “know”

we're right. When we fall into this trap, the entire discourse disintegrates into name-calling, biting and devouring.

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. (Galatians 5:15 ESV)

## **So What Is a Christian to Do?**

How shall we engage in politics? God, through His Word calls us to a counter intuitive approach to our political discourse that is remarkably different from the way the world tempts us to behave. A few examples:

How should we speak? **Speaking truth in love and only to build others up.**

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. (Ephesians 4:15 ESV)

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. (Ephesians 4:29 ESV)

How should we debate? **Look out for their interests also.**

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4 ESV)

How should we treat our opponents? **Treat them with love.**

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5:44 ESV)

How long should our anger last? **Be angry no longer than today.**

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27 ESV)

What if I offend someone? **Go and be reconciled.**

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24 ESV)

What if someone offends me? **Go and be reconciled.**

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (Matthew 18:15 ESV)

What if I see brothers or sisters who are not reconciled? **Restore them with gentleness.**

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Galatians 6:1 ESV)

Note that none of these commands are qualified. In the Bible, there are no footnotes to make exceptions for political discourse. This is the standard to which our God holds us *in life*. **Trust God and His ways.**

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. (Proverbs 3:5-7 ESV)

If you find yourself afraid the other guy will get the political upper-hand if you engage this way, then Satan himself is planting the seed of doubt just as he did in the garden when he asked, “Did God *really* say that ...?” The devil also tempts us to think *we* must be the ones to bring about God’s purposes. This is another great deception in self-idolatry. We abandon God’s commands and justify our sinful, worldly responses in the name of protecting God’s ways or achieving His purpose. **Really?!** Do you see the irony in that? We think we must protect God’s ways by violating God’s ways!?!? God does not expect us to achieve His purpose by breaking His commands. Rather, He makes this promise:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:8-11 ESV)

What if Christians were known for a different kind of politics? *Identity in Christ Politics*, that is, politics predicated on the truth that both myself and my opponent are people for whom Christ has died.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8 ESV)

## The Cure for Idolatry

Not all people for whom Christ died believe in His forgiveness. But, this truth of forgiveness is the very thing that empowers the Christian to both recognize their idolatry and to confess it, repent of it and reverse its destructive influence. The Christian life is a daily struggle with what the believer knows to be good and right and the destructive influence of the devil, the world and our sinful flesh. Even Saint Paul expresses such a struggle:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:21-24 ESV)

But then he immediately offers this promise for all of us:

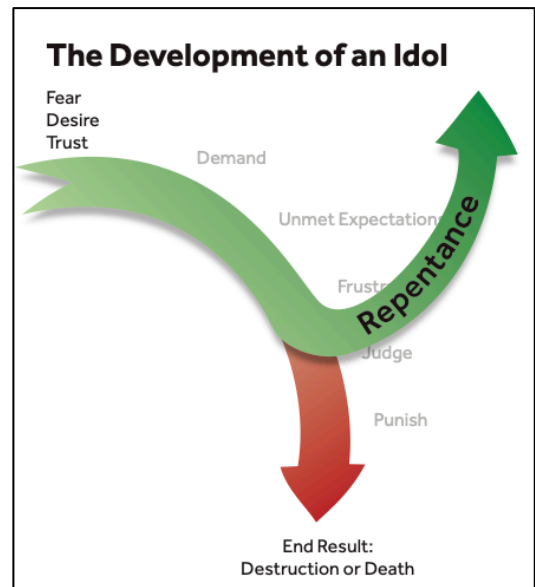
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 7:25 – 8:1 ESV)

Do you struggle to live up to God's standard in political discourse? I have good news for you. Your Jesus also knows of your struggle with this idolatry. For that very sin, He came into this world for *you*. He died for *your* forgiveness. *You* are forgiven!

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24 ESV)

Lord, empower us all to look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), so that we can make a practice of *Identity in Christ Politics*, repent of our idolatry and be the light of Christ in this fallen world. Amen

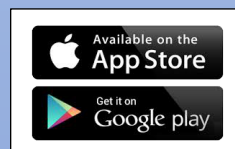
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## Teaching and Bible Study Resources

Ambassadors of Reconciliation provides a wide array of training and resources on the topic of idolatry. For example:

- *Conflict Resolution vs Reconciliation* by Ambassadors of Reconciliation is a study of reconciliation for daily living.  
<https://www.aorhope.org/product-page/conflict-resolution-vs-reconciliation>
- *Go and Be Reconciled: What Does This Mean?* by Ambassadors of Reconciliation is a study of reconciliation while reviewing *Luther's Small Catechism*.  
<https://www.aorhope.org/product-page/go-and-be-reconciled-what-does-this-mean>
- *Fear, Craving and Misplaced Trust* at downloadable and reproducible three-part Bible study by Ambassadors of Reconciliation on idolatry in conflict.  
<https://www.aorhope.org/product-page/fear-cravings-misplaced-trust-reproducible-bible-study>
- *Conflict Resolution vs Reconciliation* Seminar is a full day Bible study on reconciliation for daily living taught by one of our professional instructors.  
<https://www.aorhope.org/crvr-seminar>
- *Go and Be Reconciled: What Does This Mean?* Seminar is a full day Bible study on reconciliation while reviewing *Luther's Small Catechism* taught by one of our professional instructors.  
<https://www.aorhope.org/gabr-seminar>
- *Fear, Craving and Misplaced Trust* Seminar is a half day Bible study on idolatry in conflict taught by one of our professional instructors.  
<https://www.aorhope.org/fcmt-seminar>
- **NEW!** On-line course *Conflict Resolution vs Reconciliation Self-paced Study*  
<https://www.aorhope.org/aor-gift>
- AoR also provides extensive resources and training to equip leaders in conflict coaching, mediation, and adjudication. <https://www.aorhope.org/practicums>
- *Proclaiming God's Forgiveness* pamphlets available in sets of 10  
<https://www.aorhope.org/product-page/proclaiming-god-s-forgiveness-forms>
- FREE APP – *Proclaiming God's Forgiveness* available in



For more information, see [www.aorhope.org](http://www.aorhope.org)  
or call Ambassadors of Reconciliation at 844-447-2671.