



Jesus FaceTimes With Pharisees & Herodians

[Matthew 22:15-22]

The Issue: Jesus and Politics

There's a political schism in evangelicalism. Take Eric Metaxas. He's a Yale graduate, bestselling author, social commentator, and political pundit. He's also on the Far Right. As a follow-up to his biography on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he wrote *Letter to the American Church*—a scathing critique of what he calls the silence of U.S. churches when it comes to our nation's decline. He compares our churches to the German Church that remained silent during the Third Reich. He quotes Bonhoeffer: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act. God will not hold us guiltless."

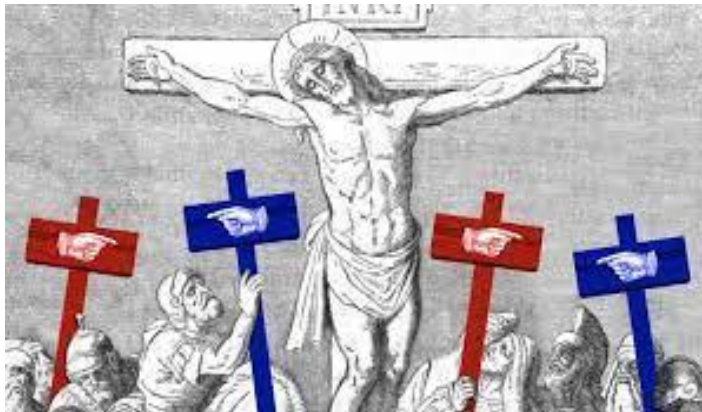
Is Mr. Metaxas right? Is the USA comparable to Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s? Should Christians jump into the cultural and political wars of our day with guns blazing? Is it our calling to remake America as a Christian nation? Or, is there an inherent danger in his brand of Christian Nationalism?

Before you answer those questions, let me introduce you to Tim Alberta, a pastor's son. Theologically, he checks all the evangelical boxes. But he's on the left. He wrote for *POLITICO* and is now a writer for *The Atlantic Magazine*. As often as Mr. Metaxas appears on Fox News, Mr. Alberta appears on MSNBC or PBS. He just wrote a bestseller called, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*. In it, he takes the opposite position of Eric Metaxas. Mr. Alberta says that evangelicals have been too



“bellicose and bawdy.” He believes 84% of white evangelicals voting for a “proud philanderer” like Donald Trump is the latest in “a long line of unprecedented disasters for the American Church.” He says these Christians have put country over God. While Mr. Metaxas sees the American Church standing silently by while today’s version of the Third Reich destroys the U.S., Mr. Alberta sees many evangelicals as today’s equivalent of the rabble-rousing Nazi Brown Shirts.

I’ve examined both men’s bestsellers. I’m glad I did. I find compelling concerns and arguments in both. I also find each to lack biblical balance. I recommend that Christians read both. They represent two sides of a growing schism in evangelical circles. They each give us insights as to why there is a growing generational divide in and outside the Church. Each book gives critical warnings we need to hear. But more than these two books, I recommend what Jesus, and the rest of the Bible have to say. After all, Jesus is our Lord. He’s the Truth! He determines how we should think and act on every issue, and not FOX NEWS, PBS, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, our favorite news feed, family. or friends.



So, let’s look at when Jesus got caught in the crossfire of the political wars of his day. I’m talking about the day he had serious Face Time with the Herodians and Pharisees. His dialogue with these cultural/political extremists gives us some great ideas on how we should respond to the political and cultural wars of our day. The encounter is

recorded in **Matthew 22:18-22**. Let’s unpack this Scripture.

One, What do Herodians and Pharisees have to do with politics?

In a word, everything. **Matthew 22:15& 15**: “Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians...” Jesus has come to Jerusalem for the last time. He’s teaching in the Temple Courts, a popular but polarizing figure. A clear and present danger to the status quo. Both the religious and political parties are out to silence him. Jesus responds in **verse 18**, “You hypocrites, why are you out to trap me?” Three observations here:

1. **2,000 years ago is a relevant as tomorrows headlines.** We live in different times, but the cast of characters is the same. The **Pharisees**: the religious nationalists of their day. They wanted a Theocracy; a nation ruled by God’s Law as Moses had originally intended. Their caps might have been inscribed with the letters **MIGA**. **Make Israel Great Again**. The **Herodians**: secular Jews; the party of Herod the Great and his sons who were puppet kings of the Romans. Theirs was the political solution. They put their trust in the State and its Strongman, Caesar Tiberius. Pharisees and Herodians were on opposite sides in the political/cultural wars of their day. But, as the old proverb goes, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”
2. **Jesus is always a threat to both Religion and the State.** He offends both religionists and secularists, the far right and the far left at the same time. If we think, talk, and act like him, we will do the same. He is the Light that shines in the darkness, and we are his lights

in a dark world. But **in John 3:20** he says, “Everyone who does evil hates the light.” There’s plenty of evil going on in the dark places of both religion and politics. Lord Acton famously said, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”—in all religions, all kinds of government, on the right, on the left, and everywhere in between. Sin is endemic and pervasive. That’s why evil people will rise up to obliterate any light exposing the deeds they do in the dark. In Matthew 22, the Church and State untie to shatter the Light on a Roman Cross. We too must be willing to be a light in a dark world, even when it results in us hanging on our own cross. That’s why Christians can’t be like the Pharisees who will stoop to any evil to protect the interests of the Church. Or the Herodians who put their trust in politics and politicians. Otherwise, our light will grow dim and even be extinguished. Like Jesus, we must expose evil. Bonhoeffer was right: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil.”

3. **When Church and State get into bed with each other, both are corrupted.** In **verse 18** Jesus sees both as evil and calls both hypocrites. Nothing good ever came of religion and state hooking up. The Early Church had enormous power when it was persecuted by the State. But, in the Fourth Century, when Emperor Constantine made the Christian religion a partner of the Roman State, the Church began to lose its power. In the year 800, the German Emperor Charlemagne said to the Bishop of Rome, “If you put the crown on my head, I’ll put the sword in your hand.” The marriage of Church and State, that took place on Christmas of that year, produced the Holy Roman Empire. It was anything but holy, producing horrors like the Crusades and Inquisition.



Both Church and State were corrupted. The Church turned to the State to enforce its will, rather than depending on the way of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. The princes of Europe could now plunder, rape, and murder in the name of God. It’s little wonder that our Founding Fathers in America wanted a clear separation of Church and State. Sadly, we have forgotten the lessons of history. We should worry when white evangelicals and conservative Catholics get in bed with the Republican Party, or when black evangelicals, the Jewish Synagogue, and mainline Protestants get in bed with the Democratic Party. Both religion and politics has been corrupted. We should never forget that, on Good Friday, both religious leaders and a political hack governor cut a deal that put the Lord of the Universe on a Roman Cross. Could there be anything more evil?



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Two, The Devil Trap is the either/or rather than both/and way.

Matthew 22:15 says the Pharisees and Herodians were setting a trap. **Verse 18** says Jesus recognized it. After buttering him up with flattery, they spring the trap in **verse 17**: “Tell us

then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?” Here’s the trap: the imperial tax must be paid in Roman money. That coinage is called a denarius. On it is inscribed the image of Caesar Tiberius, Emperor of Rome, and words declaring him to be a god. To religious Jews this is idolatry. If Jesus say, “You should pay it,” the Pharisees can claim he’s endorsing idolatry. He’s also guilty of treason for collaborating with the Romans.

If he says the taxes shouldn’t be paid, the Herodians have proof that he is a rebel, inciting insurrection. But Jesus is too wise to be trapped by the *either/or*. Our polarized society is like that. We are pushed by the right or the left to go all the way with them. If we disagree in the least we are subject to cancel culture from either side in the culture/political wars. But often the truth is a *both/and*. That’s my problem with Eric Metaxas and Tim Albert’s books. They want to push us too far one way or the other. There’s little room for nuance of thinking.

Jesus answers with a *both/and* in **verse 21**: “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and back to God what is God’s.” It not either God or Caesar, it’s both God and Caesar—each separate, but both important in their own sphere.

Three, Church and State are to be kept separate. God and Caesar are in two separate and distinctive spheres. We give something different to each. Caesar gets our taxes. God gets our worship. **Romans 13:6** says, “This is why you pay your taxes, for the [civil] authorities are God’s servants who give their full time to governing.” In this present world, believers have to live and participate in both Temple and State. But they are always to be kept separate. God give three separate offices for a purpose: kings were to oversee civil government; priests served in the temple; and prophets called out the corruption in the state and its citizens or the temple and its worshippers. They were not to intermix their roles.



In **2 Chronicles 26** we read about King Uzziah of Israel who forgot that principle. He went into the Temple and tried to light the sacrificial fires. In doing so, the king played the priest. He mixed church and state. How seriously did God take the violation of his principle of separation of religion and State? He struck King Uzziah with leprosy, forcing the ruler of Israel to spend the next 40 years in quarantine. When State and Religion get into bed together some sort of leprous corruption always ensues. The Founding Fathers of America understood that. They had seen the sad history of European State Churches, and the misery of a world were almost all the nations had state religions. When their Constitution prohibited the establishment of a state religion, it was a radical moment in world history. It was also a biblical moment. Jesus would approve for these reasons:

1. **God is over Caesar. Jesus is the Lord of lords and King of kings.** Again, what belongs to Caesar? Taxes to maintain human governments which God ordained for our good. What belongs to God? EVERYTHING. Every square inch of the universe. Our worship and obedience. Again, **Romans 13:6**: “...for the authorities are God’s servants...” When St. Paul wrote those words, the Caesar was Nero, a bloodthirsty lunatic. The Caesar inscribed on the denarius shown to Jesus was Tiberius, a narcissistic pagan, serial pedophile, and sadistic murderer. Yet, he was on the throne by God’s design.

History belongs to God. History is *His* Story. Donald Trump, Joe Biden, or whoever else wins the election in November will be there by God's design. History is moving inexorably toward Armageddon and the Return of the King of all kings. So why do we curl up in fetal balls over the possibility of the "wrong candidate" getting into office?

Should we vote? Of course we should. Should we vote for our Christian values? Of course we should. Righteous exalts a nation. Should we pray that the best possible people be elected to public office? Yes, and fervently. St. Paul wrote in **1 Timothy 2:1**, "Pray for kings and others in power so we may live *quiet* and *peaceable* lives as we worship and honor God." Did you catch those words, "...Quiet and peaceable..." Not loud, nasty, and panic-stricken so that, like the Pharisees or Herodians, we resort to evil tricks to get our way in this world.

2. **We owe Caesar our taxes. We owe God our lives.** God, and not the State, owns us and our children. We may have the privilege of living in the U.S., but "our citizenship is in heaven from where we await our Savior, Jesus Christ." [**Philippians 3:20**] When governing authorities (whether in the state, church, or family) tell us to do what God forbids in his Word, we must obey God every time. Early Christians were not fed to the lions because they believed a Jewish Carpenter was the Risen Lord, but because they bowed their knee to him as the Savior of the World rather than the Roman State. We should understand, as Big Government grows more pervasive and corrupt, we too will become a clear and present danger to the system. We will also become *persona non grata* to other believers

because we don't share their political views. God or Caesar will become a dividing point even in religion.



3. **In God's economy, theocracy is a one-and-done form of legitimate government for Christians until Jesus returns.** Israel as "One Nation Under God" was already gone when the Pharisees and Herodians came to trap Jesus. The Herodians knew Jewish theocracy was never coming back, and had already attached their wagon to the Roman State and its Caesar.

The Pharisees wanted to "Make Israel Great Again " by returning to what they thought had been "One Nation Under God." But, when you read the Old Testament, you see that Israel had hardly ever been a nation under God. Neither has America. Israel's sins were great, and so are America's. Except for a brief half-century under the Maccabees, Israel had been occupied by foreign powers since 800 years before Christ, and would be so until 1947. Even today, Israel is a secular nation, with the highest percentage of atheists in the world, and a persecutor of Christians within its borders. Jerusalem is not the Holy City. The Theocracy of Moses was long gone when the denarius was put in Jesus' hand that day.

After his resurrection, Jesus gave his Great Commission to his followers. [See **Matthew 28:18-20**] God's economy has now changed. His people are to be scattered as lights

among the nations, sharing the gospel. He prayed about his disciples in his **John 17** Upper Room prayer, "...they are in the world, but not of it." In the best sense of the word, we are to be globalists, not nationalists. We are first citizens of heaven, and not the U.S. [or whatever nation you are from]. There will never be another Jerusalem to call home until the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven as our dwelling place in a new earth. Until then, we are pilgrims passing through on the way to heaven.

4. **The model for us today is found in Jeremiah 29. We are living in Babylon, and waiting for Jerusalem.** Every Christian should ponder **Jeremiah 29:4-10** during this election year. The Jews had been carried into Babylonian Captivity because of their sins. They were there by God's decree. Remember, history is *His* Story. False prophets were telling them that their exile was up and they could go back to old Jerusalem. So God gave a message through his prophet Jeremiah. "Jerusalem isn't in the cards right now. You are to stay in Babylon as strangers. Build your homes there. Plant your gardens. Raise your kids. Find good spouses for them amongst those who follow God. Now, catch **verse seven**: "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord, for if it [Babylon] prospers, you too will prosper." America is not Jerusalem. It never has been. Otherwise, we wouldn't have instituted slavery and segregation, genocided native Americans, stolen land from weaker nations by force, or been involved in so much corruption. I love the country of my birth, but I am not ignorant of its 250 years of sins. This is not, nor never shall be, a spiritual Jerusalem. We live as exiles in Babylon on the Potomac. So, what do we learn from this Jeremiah model?

- **Old Jerusalem is gone; New Jerusalem will only come with Christ's return.** We are not called to turn Babylon into a shining city on a hill. We as Christians are called to be that "shining city on a hill." That's what Jesus called us in his Sermon on the Mount. St. Augustine said that we are to be *The City of God* within the Cities of Men. But the Holy Jerusalem will never be rebuilt by us on this earth. It will come from heaven (where we are citizens) with our Savior. It is a city "not built with human hands." [**Hebrews 11:10**] Yes, righteousness exalts a nation. We should work toward that end for our Babylon. But Christian Nationalism is unbiblical because it mixes country with God.



- **We are exiles in Babylon.** We should never forget that this world is not our home. As the old Spiritual puts it, "We are just a passing through." We live in Babylon. God may bless the USA, but it is still Babylon. Babylon may be stamped on our passports. But we are not Babylonians. We are citizens of God's Kingdom of Heaven. Christ is our King. The Bible is our Constitution. In eternity,

the United States will just be a footnote in a world long forgotten. But we shall live forever and ever on a new earth under new heavens.

- **We should seek the best for our Babylon. We should even work for the best for every Babylon on this planet as long as we don't participate in evil.** We should work for the best outcomes in the world our children and grandkids will inherit. Whatever brings peace and prosperity to our land (and even our wider world) should be our aim. We should give to Caesar what is his. We should pray for our leaders, and even those we didn't vote for (or won't vote for). I may not like the flight crew, but I don't want them to have a bad day when I or my family are on their airliner. Nor do I want the elected officials I didn't vote for to have a bad day. We should even serve in the government, even as Daniel did through three corrupt Babylonian administrations, but without ever compromising integrity. God comes first, even if we end up in a lion's den.



- **We should vote for the least bad Babylonian.** We might wish that Daniel, Shadrack, Meshack, or Abednego were running for public office. More likely, we get to choose between Nebuchadnezzar or Balthazar—yet again the unsavory choice of voting for the lesser of two evils. Or to put it another way, “The least bad Babylonian.” Though we are privileged in the United States to go through a system designed to give us the best and brightest choice, history teaches us that we too are often left with voting for the least bad one who will give us and our children hopefully the best chance for peace and prosperity. At least we should pray and work to that end.
- **We should be on guard against the spirit of Anti-Christ.** *Christus* is the Greek word for the Anointed One, Messiah, or Savior. Jesus alone is that. *Anti-Christ* could be translated as the un-Savior or other-Savior. Beware of men or women, whether they be religious or secular, who promise to do what only Jesus can do. We are so easily seduced by political Strongmen who promise, if we put them in office, they will fix everything that is wrong. That is the language of Anti-Christ. The best and brightest will always fall far short of Jesus.
- **We are called first to spiritual warfare, not cultural or political warfare.** The best we can hope for in Babylon is peace and prosperity. But it never lasts. Only eternity lasts. That's why St. Paul, in **Ephesians 6:12**, calls us to the only war that makes a difference for eternity. What belongs to God, belongs to God alone. We do not promote the Elephant or the Donkey. Nor do we fall apart in despair if the wrong party gets control. We will survive Nebuchadnezzar, Nero, Tiberius, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao as did saints who came before us. Caesars come and go, but Jesus continues to rule. That's why we lift up the Lion and the Lamb! In the end, we can't change culture or society. Jesus, however, changes people. If enough people get the Resurrected Christ in them, then over time the world changes too. Our endgame isn't November of 2024. We are playing longball.

We are hitting for the fences of eternity, one sinner at a time. Our game is the Great Commission.

- **Don't let the Pharisees and Herodians divide and conquer.** The devil's aim is always to divide and conquer. We live in days when politicians and culture warriors on both sides try to polarize and divide people. It's a double tragedy when it happens in the Church. Don't allow how others think or vote take your eyes off Jesus, or cause you to leave churches, or wall yourself off from Christians who think differently than you. We are all in process. Let's learn to dialogue with each other, listen to one another's views in a Christlike manner, sometimes agree to disagree, and then leave the results to Jesus. After all, what is God's is God's, and not ours to fix. Beware in fighting dragons that you don't become dragons! If that happens, the Great Dragon has won the day.

DR. BOB'S QUESTIONS TO PONDER



1. DO YOU AGREE WITH MY ASSERTION THAT CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IS A HERESY? WHEN DOES PATRIOTISM CROSS OVER INTO IDOLATRY?

2. WHAT ARE THE MARKS OF ANTI-CHRIST THAT WE SHOULD BEWARD OF WHEN EVALUATING POLITICAL CANDIDATES?

3. IF WE ARE VOTING FOR THE LEAST BAD BABYLONIAN, WHAT ARE THE MARKERS WE SHOULD LOOK FOR IN CASTING OUR VOTE?

3. WHY IS SPIRITUAL WARFARE MORE EFFECTIVE IN GIVING OUR CHILDREN A BETTER WORLD THAN ENGAGING IN POLITICAL OR CULTURAL WARFARE?