

The effects of a



Biden victory:

Christian media,



politics

and agape love

The Clarion explores how Biden's presidential win directly affects members of the Bethel community.

By Rachel Blood | News Reporter

Matt Runion, Associate Dean of Christian Formation and Church Relations, finds today's endless mix of social media and politics toxic. Engaging in social media beyond videos of cats and cake decorating requires an extreme amount of energy, especially when maintaining fruitful conversations.

The election has brought thousands of similar posts to the Instagram and Snapchat stories of Bethel students calling for peace and unity, endorsing a particular candidate, or saying "No matter what happens... Jesus is King." Bridging divides through the media and asking for peace is fine, said Runion, but it is not possible to actually achieve such things on social media.

Associate Campus Pastor Jason Steffenhagen emphasized the importance of differentiating between politics and personal identity. When the two are too closely attached, a person might feel their identity is being attacked and meaningful dialogue becomes difficult. Politics and a political affiliation are not the same thing — politics discuss governing society and making choices about how policies impact people.

"The problem with social media platforms as a space for political dialogue is that they lack empathy," Steffenhagen said. "When I sit across the table from someone, I can learn their story and hear why they are passionate about a certain political topic ... on social media, my words are open to everyone and everyone ... I'm more likely to be definitive than inquisitive."

When a person posts "No matter what happens... Jesus is King" online, Runion wonders if they're throwing up their hands and resigning to political apathy, checking out and neglecting the significance and relevance of politics in their community, or reminding their followers of the constance and centrality of Christ as a means of comfort and familiarity.

Runion thinks that ultimately, the goal of a Christian is to follow Christ and obey his call to actively love and engage people and communities.

"We shouldn't separate our faith from political engagement," Steffenhagen said. He encourages people to carry principals and values while recognizing that being political extends far beyond voting once every four years.

Steffenhagen said that every time an individual spends money and time, they are making a decision about the world they're living in. That means living out values the other 364 days of the year with their time, energy and money.

Online platforms including Facebook and Instagram

have been flooded in recent months with political opinions and responses. Users claim they have heard confirmation of a Trump victory from modern-day prophets.

Biden is a lifelong Catholic and documentaries have shown that his faith guides his private and public life alike. Runion said what's most important to him is that Biden's faith informs his character in his leadership.

In the 2016 election, users reminded their followers that Trump sat in the White House because God wanted him to be there. Those same believers will likely not say the same for Biden, a double standard Runion says goes back for centuries. People historically attach divine blessings to political leaders of their choice, he said.

Steffenhagen said people are passionate for a number of reasons, including wanting to help others, achieve justice or fearing change or lack of change.

"Fear is one of the most impassioned and intense motivators," Steffenhagen said. "The important thing is to honor a person's passion and then ask questions to understand where that passion or intensity comes from."

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- Pastor Matt Runion

The next step is trusting a person's story and experience even when it is unfamiliar or different. In Steffenhagen's eyes, the assumption that all governments and societies practice equality means forgetting history.

Runion explained that people feel so passionately about their candidate of choice that they can become polarized, especially in the cultural movement America is going through. He addressed the "extremes" attached to opposing political candidates. He said Americans are constantly told that one candidate is good while one is evil, that one is safe and one is dangerous, one that is the future and one that is the end.

"That's true whether you're a follower of Christ or not," Runion said.

He believes that Christians are called to engage communities and be a part of difficult conversations. He emphasized that those who choose not to engage in politics are not excused from passionate engagement with what affects their neighbors.

When political engagement keeps an individual from loving their neighbors, or even enemies, Runion said, then they are putting politics over faith. Faith should always be first and foremost and should inform our politics.

Steffenhagen acknowledged the difficulty of change. It sometimes comes alongside grief and loss. When a person attaches their identity to a political party or candidate, it is normal for political change to feel personal. He said the issue in the current system is that politics seem to be about the accumulation of money and power rather than the creation of policies for the common good. People root for the candidates they identify with and feel victimized when their preferred victors are not winning.

"Trust, I think, has eroded so much in our general life that we let that seep into our particular relationships," Runion said. "I need to start with a place of trust, especially with the body of Christ, and then show that trust by building a relationship, not defining it. I think this general erosion of trust is devastating for the community. Both Christian community and the broader nation."

Runion said Steffenhagen encourages his teams to value relationships over rightness. That may mean sacrificing the desire for victory in an argument, or even an election.

"Politics is about influencing systems that should provide support to people," said Steffenhagen. "There are different views and ideologies and perspectives, but it should be about people."

Steffenhagen said the Bible has more than 6,000 verses instructing the powerful on how to treat the poor. How society treats the people with the least power should, at the end of the day, matter more than whether a certain political party won.

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