

Nation-building, Part 10: “Pastor-in-Chief?”

Hello, I'm David Rowe from Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in Fairfield, Connecticut, and you've found your way to our podcast on citizenship, governance, and leadership from a biblical and faith perspective. Thank you for caring about such topics. Feel free to be in touch. Push back, push ahead. I would love your response.

For today's episode, let's look idealistically, with our best ideals intact at what we could be as citizens, leaders in government. And let's start by imagining a clean slate. No political parties, no incumbents. We've not yet had twelve men in dark suits and one woman in a pantsuit on a debate stage. There's been no polling, super PACs, dark money, backroom deals, or front page endorsements. It's a clean slate. What would you want in an elected leader? From town zoning board to first select person to president and anyone in between what? Not who, what would you want? Art Buchwald, a long ago political humorist, wrote a column asking, *why is it always the same six men running to be president?* Back then, and I think this was around 1970 or so, there was always Republican Harold Stassen, socialist Norman Thomas, and always a Democrat Hubert Humphrey type and a Ralph Nader type and a bellicose Pat Buchanan type. Why always them, wondered Buchwald, the same six. Well, he looked at all the categories and types of people Americans back then wouldn't consider, whole ethnicities and colors and genders, all sorts of limitations and disqualifications, and all we were left with were the same six.

On the day after the last presidential election, the news outlets were full of conjecture about which Democrats and Republicans would be running in 2028. And it was mostly everyone who's run before. We can already picture the faces on the TV debate stage in 2027. But what if we started fresh? What if a fresh batch of Americans started deciding right now that they feel called to leadership and deciding right now what kind of leadership they would offer? And what if American citizens started thinking right now what kind of leadership we want? What kind of citizens we will each of us be? Where would we begin, we would-be leaders and would-be citizens. With a plan, a promise, a platform? Would we gather information, do a survey, go door to door, hire consultants? Would we study history? Would we pray, search the scriptures, try to discern God's will and wisdom?

You might be amazed by how many leaders were reluctant leaders. In the Bible, there's Moses, he wanted absolutely nothing to do with confronting Egypt's Pharaoh and leading the Israelites to liberation. Jacob literally wrestled against God. Jonah told God *no* repeatedly till being swallowed by that whale, and that changed his thinking. The prophet Jeremiah tried to talk his way out of helping God, claiming to be too young. Even King Solomon was quite uncertain that he should be king.

George Washington refused to hang on to the presidency, rejecting a grasping type of power. Netflix has a new four-part series on President Garfield. If you can overlook a lot of gratuitous cursing, it is a good look at the backside of politics. Garfield himself fought tooth and nail against becoming president. Once convinced to run, he was assassinated just four months into his term before his best intentions could be tested. Even in my profession as a church pastor, you'd be surprised to learn how many of the great saints and most effective church pastors and even local church lay leaders, how many had to be talked into, prayed into being leaders.

So the idea that someone considering leadership might start the process with prayer, might search the scriptures, might try to discern God's will and wisdom, well, that is a great way to start. Humble, open, searching, listening.

Well, here's some scriptures that could guide anyone hoping to lead and willing to be a good citizen. They come from the book of Proverbs, which is just what it sounds like Proverbs, wise sayings meant to guide the future leaders of Israel. Here's a taste. Righteousness exalts a nation, the book of Proverbs says. He who presses the poor shows contempt for their maker, and whoever is kind to the needy honors God. Kings detest wrongdoing. Love and faithfulness keeps a king safe. Through love his throne is made secure. By justice a king gives a country stability. Idealistic? Yes. Everything about Christianity is idealistic. The word we use in our church all the time is Christlikeness, being like Christ. That is super idealistic. Idealistic is a nice word. It refers to having ideals we hang on to.

At my *Religion in the News* class recently we dove into a deep David Brooks column about his faith journey in modern times, and our group came to the same conclusion that Brooks was making, that we need to rediscover the ideals that bond us together. We spend so much energy in our divisions and differences on who's wrong and who's bad we lose sight of what's good, noble, valuable. Get it? Valuable: values, ideas. What's worse, we let ourselves think that to be idealistic is naive, unrealistic, stupid won't work in the real world. Then when we enter the world of politics, leave your ideals at home.

When we think of the arena of politics, we might say it's not rocket science. It is complicated. It's not brain surgery. It's like herding cats. Those popular sayings remind us that governance, citizenship, and leadership are not easy, but they are possible. But since inevitably some will choose to govern, we have the right to say how. Whether it's an elected president, a prime minister negotiated among competing parties, or a tyrant ruling on their own say so, someone will be in charge. But how will they go about being in charge? I chose today's title pastor in chief, precisely because it is at the nexus of what we sometimes want and yet often say we don't want in our government leaders. At times of national tragedy

certain leaders do rise to the occasion. President Bush after 9/11, President Obama after the Charleston, South Carolina, Emmanuel Church Bible study massacre, Bush's embrace of a firefighter standing on the 9/11 rubble, Obama's singing of amazing grace at Emmanuel's memorial service. Both served as a national group hug.

Yet we hear it said, we're not electing a pastor in chief, we want a commander in chief. Well, I guess I'm asking, can one command and still care? Can one lead and still serve?

The idea of servant leadership was popular in business circles for a time, and Jesus modeled it at his last supper, when he washed the disciples' feet. After he did that he explained to his shocked friends and for our benefit too, now I have set you an example that I, your Lord, have washed your feet. You also should wash one another's feet. You will be blessed if you do. Jesus imagined leadership that was not in it for themselves, not seeking personal gain, not hoarding wealth or power. He humbled himself to get down on his hands and knees to wash the grimy, sweaty feet of his own disciples. *There*, Jesus was saying, *That's my model for leadership*. Christianity was birthed by discipleship, foot washing, and crucifixion, all acts of sacrifice compelled by servanthood.

Elsewhere, Jesus prioritized the same thinking and behavior for honest to God leadership. The greatest among you will be your servant, he told the disciples, the someday-leaders of his worldwide movement. And again, for even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve. While writing this episode (and yes, I actually do real writing with a real pilot pen and real paper!) I also Googled for a reference. And up popped AI, artificial intelligence, as if begging to weigh in on this episode. Here's AI's take on Jesus, and I quote: *Jesus is considered the ultimate example of servant leadership, teaching that true greatness comes from serving others, not from exercising authority*. And then it lists key aspects of Jesus' servant leadership humility and service, purpose over position, leading by example, love and sacrifice.

Gee, wish I'd written that. Christianity tried that way of leadership successfully for three centuries. But once the church was entrenched with wide acceptance and earthly power, we took on the trappings of earthly power. Church leaders were actually called princes. The higher-ups lived in palaces, sat on thrones, and wore elaborate royal clothing. Church and state became a thing because the church chose to mimic the state in look and clout. We surrendered servanthood, preferring masterhood if there is such a word. Today's quote from Proverbs contains key words for the right side and the wrong side of governance. On the right side are words like righteousness, kindness, love, faithfulness, safety, security, stability, and justice. Leaders, leadership, government, and nation that feature righteousness, kindness, love, faithfulness, and justice will experience the rare results of safety, security, and stability. That's the promise.

My career in ministry and mission have led me to places of civil war, terrorism, martial law, official corruption, government shutdowns, and violent protests. All the egotistical tyrants running those places took power promising safety, security, and stability. None delivered. Instead, fear, oppression, tanks in the streets, disappearances, targeted assassinations, political bullying were proof of their failure. Now the Book of Proverbs also uses words for the bad side of governing contempt, oppression, wrongdoing, mostly toward the poor and the needy.

The beloved pastor Timothy Keller helped expand our standard idea of the poor, needy, widow, orphan, and homeless by asking us to imagine the vulnerable. Who in our place, our time, our circle of influence, our arms reach are vulnerable? Of course, that changes from place to place and from time to time. Our purpose is to find those vulnerabilities and touch them lovingly and effectively.

By the mid-1980's, AIDS was one vulnerable population. At least in my experience, most people with AIDS were young, male, urban, educated, afraid, alone, ostracized, and dying. Would Americans and faith communities respond with righteousness or fear? Ignorance or love? Actually, all four. Anti-gay rhetoric was matched by the extraordinary and compassionate charities like *God's Love We Deliver*. Fear was met by courage, dying was met by love. Decades on, life and love are lived to the fullest within the AIDS community. Righteousness works, righteousness wins, and leadership leads.

And today the most prominent vulnerables are immigrants, refugees, exiles brought to our shores by the twin terrors of poverty and politics. If you could get your family out of Nicaragua, Syria, Haiti, Afghanistan, you would risk anything to try. Yet our nation's will and the way forward are clouded. America needs workers. Immigrants need safety. Borders have been overrun, cities cannot bear the burden, calls for justice run up against competing calls for justice. America is stuck.

Think with me. How could we bring the wisdom of those proverbs to bear on the urgencies of human need and the opportunities for human care awaiting us? Using those same ancient biblical words from Proverbs, where is righteousness in our political equation? In what way do we show or avoid contempt for the maker of the poor? How can our kindness to the needy honor God? Where is our love and faithfulness and justice that secure our stability promised from heaven itself?

Biblical leadership is defined by its founding principles, our values. We build out from there. Other kinds of leadership are poll driven, popularity driven, short term gain, personal gain, what plays well, what's a good photo op, what yields the best soundbite? Is that actual leadership? Or merely another kind of followership? There's a saying from war that's

really instructive. Soldiers will say *I'd follow that person into battle*. When a soldier enters battle, everything is at risk. They may well kill or be killed. In anticipation of those two awful outcomes, a soldier decides that this particular general or captain or this particular platoon sergeant is the one to follow, to be in charge, to make decisions, to lead the way, to give you the best chance.

Likewise in sports, it is often said of great baseball pitchers, football quarterbacks, and legendary coaches, they always put us in the best position to win. The best leader puts the best person in the best position to do their best with the best outcome at least possible and reasonable. Can't we apply that thinking to citizenship, leadership, and governance?

Okay, back to immigration. Each side of the debate offers simplistic, bad press about the other side. One side is described as wanting open borders, there's plenty for everybody, come on in as if they worship at the Statue of Liberty. The other side is described as showing up in militarized war vehicles, wearing draconian outfits instilling fear, determined to round them all up, ship them out, send them back where they came from, as if no room in the inn. Each side is either holier than thou or on the side of the angels. We toss around words like fascism, progressive, law and order, and liberal until they've lost their meaning. Why do we think that God is limited by our binary lack of imagination? While those two sides are shouting past each other, how about the rest of us imagining fresh ways?

What would happen if we started from some of God's best-known standards, imperatives, frameworks, guidelines, and applied them? What would immigration look like if our leaders and citizens who most often claim to be religious people remembered Bible verses like once you were strangers in a foreign land, when I was a stranger you took me in? What if they, as self-professed Bible believers, really wanted to find a way to do justice, love mercy, go the extra mile, render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, obey the governing authorities, render unto God what is God's, welcome the stranger, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, practice hospitality, set at liberty the oppressed. What if they and we remember Jesus' question *Who is my neighbor?* That comes from his famous parable of the Good Samaritan during which Jesus redefines neighbor as two sides of the same coin. A neighbor is a person in need, and the person in position to help with the need.

We've all heard the comment *we can't save the whole world*. Rather than using that as an excuse to do nothing, let's focus on who we can save, can help, can feed. Who are we neighbor to? To whom are we able to be neighborly? I plucked all those mostly well known verses straight from the Bible. Other nicknames for the Bible are holy writ, God's Word, good news, gospel truth, the good book. Together they define a book worth knowing and applying. These particular verses and the earlier ones from Proverbs are written over several centuries of lived human experience mixed with divine inspiration. By that I mean a

person back in ancient times looks at a certain kind of king and says, Well that didn't work out too well, and then God whispers in their ear, Well, maybe you should try this.

See? Lived experience plus inspiration equals a verse that ends up in the Bible to guide us. That's what biblical guidelines are for. The Bible doesn't expressly address every single problem. There's no mention of heroin or pornography or gambling per se. But the Bible offers some pretty broad hints about things that destroy life, body and soul. So we take those hints and apply them to our current life issues. But looking at the list of Bible verses I just quoted, they are a tad stronger than broad hints. They clearly see a world of hurt, fear, desperation, urgency, and tell us to take note and take action.

That is where the eyes of government, governors, governance should be focused. Righteousness exalts a nation, the Bible says of the governing and the governed. Whoever is kind to the needy honors God. We all should be awaking each morning with that agenda.

That's governing. That's leadership. That's citizenship. Idealistically. Be in touch. God bless you.