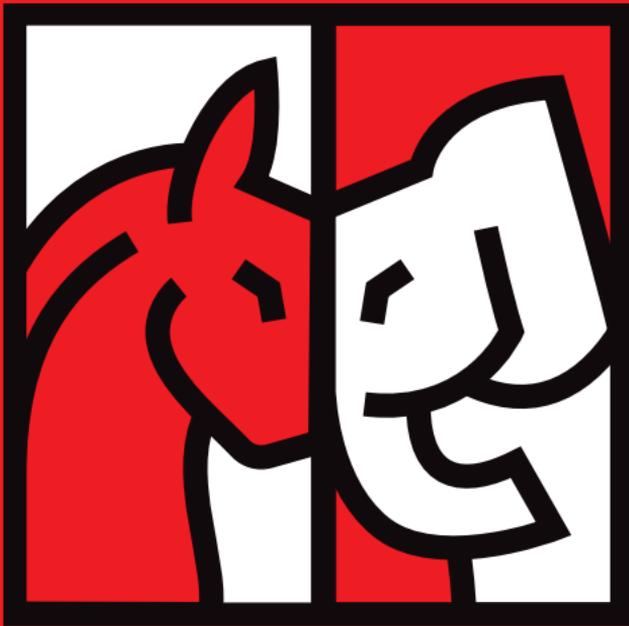


IX 9Marks

How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?



**Jonathan Leeman
& Andy Naselli**

Church Questions

Endorsements for the Church Questions Series

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sincere questions deserve thoughtful answers. If you’re not sure where to start in answering these questions, let this series serve as a diving board into the pool. These mini-books are winsomely to-the-point and great to read together with one friend or one hundred friends.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *The Pastor’s Wife*

“As a pastor, I get asked lots of questions. I’m approached by unbelievers seeking to understand the gospel, new believers unsure about next steps, and maturing believers wanting help answering questions from their Christian family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. It’s in these moments that I wish I had a book to give them that was brief, answered their questions, and pointed them in the right direction for further study. Church Questions is a series that provides just that. Each booklet tackles one question in a biblical, brief, and practical manner. The series may be called Church Questions, but it could be called ‘Church Answers.’ I intend to pick these up by the dozens and give them away regularly. You should too.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

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Church Questions

How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?, Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli

What If I Don't Desire to Pray?, John Onwuchekwa

What If I'm Discouraged in My Evangelism?, Isaac Adams

What Should I Do Now That I'm a Christian?, Sam Emadi

Why Should I Join a Church?, Mark Dever

How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?

Jonathan Leeman and
Andy Naselli

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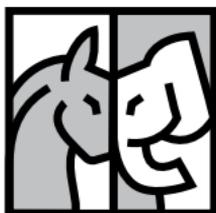
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“What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?” And when he said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free.”

Matthew 17:25–26

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Romans 15:5–6



It was the Sunday after a presidential election. I (Jonathan) had been teaching an adult Sunday school class on Christians and government that fall. The church, like most of the nation, was still absorbing the result of the election's unexpected outcome. And feelings that morning were raw.

I began the class by talking about sympathy. I wanted to encourage members whose candidate had won on Tuesday to sympathize with members whose candidate had lost. Christian maturity, I observed to the class, knows how to both disagree with someone and yet still show

compassion. An older minority woman whose candidate had lost raised her hand and said that she had not felt any sympathy from the church and that she was scared. Minutes later, a middle-aged white woman raised her hand and said she was astonished at my call for sympathy because the losing side was “evil.”

At that moment—you can be sure—I second-guessed my decision to teach that class that morning.

Yet those two women offer us something very honest: a picture of how challenging it can be to love people with different political opinions, even when they are members of the same church.

This question is what we want to address in this book: *How can we love fellow church members when we disagree on political matters?*

Make no mistake: Andy and I are writing this booklet because we need it too. We can both think of moments that highlight our own challenges to love when political topics arise. Moments like:

- Avoiding that guy who always wants to talk about his political hobbyhorse.

- Regarding that woman condescendingly because she just feels too far right or too far left.
- Feeling like that fellow member is the enemy, maybe not even a real Christian, because he voted for the other side.

Such feelings can arise whether viewing people to our right or to our left on the political spectrum.

Why We Feel Skeptical or Angry toward Fellow Members amid Political Differences

Our concern here is not with the mild disagreements, ones that don't affect the heart's posture toward someone else. Rather, we're interested in the disagreements that affect your heart's posture or that hinder fellowship with another person in your church. Maybe you feel scorn. Maybe you are angry that they support a cause that you are convinced is unjust. You might even find yourself questioning their profession of faith: "How can they be Christians and support *that?!?*"

We can think of at least three reasons such skepticism arises in our hearts amid such disagreements.

Reason 1: Justified People Care about Justice

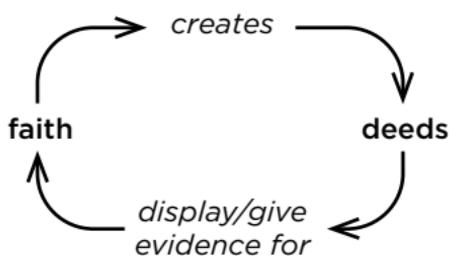
The work of government is fundamentally concerned with matters of justice, and people who have been justified by Christ—Christians—care about justice. They care about *righteous judgments*, which is one way to define justice from the Bible. It makes sense, therefore, that you would ask questions, even become skeptical, when Christians choose what appears to be a path of injustice. They appear to be making unrighteous judgments.

Let's unpack all of this. God instituted governments to establish a basic platform of justice for everyone created in his image (Gen. 9:5–6; 2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kings 10:9; Prov. 29:4; Rom. 13:1–7). That means all those conversations you have with friends and colleagues about the election, abortion, immigration, poverty, same-sex marriage, criminal-justice reform, America's trade policy with China, or party membership are conversations fundamentally about justice.

Furthermore, anger is the God-given emotion for responding to injustice. If you hear of a

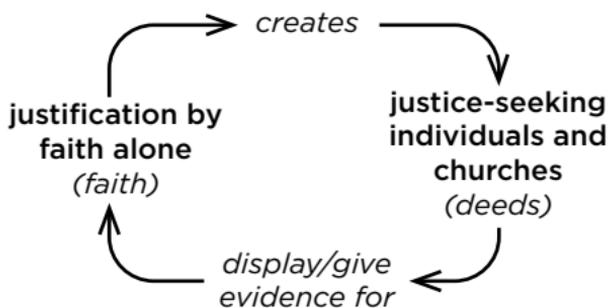
child being abused, you should be angry. Anger's purpose, after all, is to oppose. We Christians should all oppose injustice. So think again of your conversation with fellow church members over the election or immigration or welfare policy. When they disagree with you, your instincts tell you they are choosing injustice. They are recommending unrighteous judgments, and that can make you angry.

If it's a particularly significant issue, it can even tempt you to question their standing in the faith. Why? Think about it like this. James tells us that true faith creates good deeds and that good deeds demonstrate our faith. Our good works prove that our faith is genuine: "I will show you my faith by my works," he says in James 2:18 (see the diagram below).



Which means, when deeds are absent, we lack evidence for faith. James even questions the faith of someone who demonstrates no deeds: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19). Like Jesus said, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16, 20). Are you with us so far?

Now, instead of saying *faith* and *deeds*, let’s substitute *justification* and *justice*, which offer another way of getting at the same ideas. In the same way that faith creates deeds, so God’s work of justifying a person by grace through faith creates a concern about justice. And in the same way that deeds display and give evidence of faith, so our concern for justice demonstrates and gives evidence for our justification (see the diagram below 2).



It's a virtuous cycle, if there ever was one.

Now let's pull everything together. Politics involves questions of justice. When fellow Christians disagree with you on significant political matters, you question their commitment to justice, which in turn can sometimes tempt you to question their justification. We're not saying you're always *right* to do so. We're merely saying it *makes sense* that this happens. There are theologically correct instincts at play. Plus, every once in a while, such questioning *is* right.

For now, let's consider the next reason we may feel skeptical.

Reason 2: Self-Justifying People Are Certain Their Convictions Are Just

We are tempted to scorn and second-guess our fellow church members whose politics disagree with ours because every one of us is naturally self-righteous and self-justifying, and fallen politics is fueled by such self-righteousness and self-justification.

Part of Adam and Eve's decision to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit was convincing

themselves that eating the fruit was a just act. Ever since, we have been self-justifying creatures. Adam's bite of the fruit and Pharaoh's spilling of blood are the same thing: self-justified acts of self-rule.

Now, people may often be right in their opinions and in their politics, but that's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about the basic posture of the fallen heart to always think that it's right—to always think its cause is just. Even as children, we would get into fights with our siblings over dolls and trucks because we were convinced our causes were just. *But Mom, he hit me first!* When we were born again, wonderfully, we lost the need to justify ourselves before God through our personal and political pursuits. Christ became our justification. Whenever we walk in the Spirit, then, we become able to seek out the plank in our own eye, not just the speck in our neighbor's eye, and to fight for what's right, not to justify ourselves but for the sake of love. Born-again politics is a different kind of politics.

The challenge is that we are presently located at a moment in the Bible's storyline of redemp-

tion where we find ourselves simultaneously justified and sinful. We are capable of walking by the flesh and the Spirit both. As authors, therefore, our goal is to help you be a little more theologically self-aware. Are you convinced about your own political opinions? If so, maybe that's because you are walking in the Spirit, you love your neighbor as yourself, and you have rightly formed judgments about the issues of the day. Then again, it also might be because you are following the self-justifying script of every other political party, of every other tribe and nation, throughout the history of the world.

All this means that the anger you feel when people disagree with you politically might be the right response to injustice. But remember God's word: we must be "slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:19–20, NIV). Too often we use our anger as a weapon to destroy anything that opposes our personalized version of a just universe. We're self-serving with our anger.

To summarize reasons 1 and 2, our anger and skepticism toward fellow church members with

different politics makes sense, but it may not be as righteous as we think it is. We give with one hand what we take away with the other.

Still, all of that is pretty theological. It's this next reason that forces us to start getting into the practical weeds.

Reason 3: Political Judgments Require Wisdom

Most political judgments we make depend on wisdom not on directly applying explicit biblical principles. To put this another way, there is some space between our biblical and theological principles and our specific political judgments. Two Christians might agree on a biblical or theological principle but disagree on which policies, methods, tactics, or timing best uphold that principle. Why, then, are political disagreements so difficult? Because we lack wisdom!

What is wisdom? It's a capacity of mind that combines the fear of the Lord with the skill of living in God's created but fallen world in a way that yields justice, peace, and flourishing. It looks to God's word, yes, but it also takes stock of circumstances, people, and all the knowledge

Election seasons can cause division on a variety of issues. But what happens when you disagree with someone in your local church community? Authors Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli propose that Christians should learn how to disagree on such issues with a spirit of gracious understanding by recognizing the importance of what binds us together as a local church body—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Church Questions is a series that seeks to provide ordinary Christians with sound and accessible biblical teaching by answering common questions they have about church life. Each volume offers biblical answers and practical applications with the goal of nurturing healthy church practice and commitment.

Jonathan Leeman (PhD, University of Wales) is the editorial director for 9Marks as well as an established author and adjunct professor. He is an elder of Cheverly Baptist Church.

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CHURCH RESOURCES

