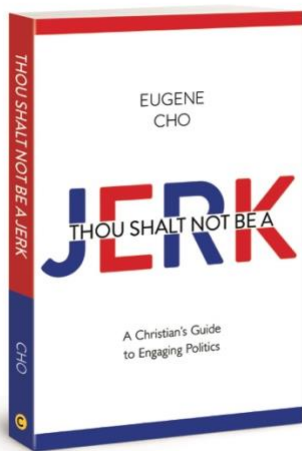


Q & A with Eugene Cho, author of *Thou Shall Not Be A Jerk: A Christian's Guide to Engaging in Politics*



Q: Why did you decide to write about faith and politics?

A: I am deeply concerned, and at times deeply grieved, by the state of the political affairs in our society. The heart of this book is to tend to fellow Christians who deeply care about our society, church, culture, and politics. Many of them want to engage but don't quite know how to go about this messy and chaotic space.

As a pastor, I've heard this countless times: *"I care. I want to care. I just don't know how to go about it."* You're not alone. I'm wrestling, too. It feels jarring. So many of us are wondering how we can be faithful to Christ, remain engaged, and maintain our integrity. It is my hope and prayer that *Thou Shall Not Be a Jerk* will help us all continue to be Christ-like in the chaos and craziness of our political climate.

Q: How do you see politics playing out among Christians in the U.S.?

A: Within the Church, it's all too convenient to blame the larger culture and society. I'm equally concerned by the manner in which Christians are engaging the political machine. For example, certain Christians have altogether dismissed and disengaged themselves from the political process—either because it's too exhausting or because of the theological bent that shapes their conclusion that a follower of Jesus should only focus on "spiritual things."

Simultaneously, I'm concerned by Christians who appear to be overly obsessed by politics, those who have chosen to justify everything they do for the sake of political ideology, views, or convictions. And I'm concerned by Christians who are more influenced by a vision of cultural Christianity and the power they can wield in our society without necessarily being about the ways and heart of Christ.

Q. So will your book appeal to those on the left or on the right?

A: As someone who wrestles with wanting to be liked by everybody and avoiding conflict, this is absolutely the worst possible book to write. As we all know, there are two topics that shouldn't be discussed: Religion and Politics. Oh well. People will read *Thou Shall Not Be a Jerk* and come to completely different conclusions. To some, I'm too conservative. To others, I'm too liberal.

If this book is remotely pulling its weight, it should challenge, and at times upset, people from various political sides. I'm certain that every single person who reads this book will disagree with something if not many things, and that's okay. While those who are firmly entrenched in their views, camps, and tribes may find little use for this book except to disagree with me, I'm hopeful there are many in between who might be both encouraged and challenged to more faithfully and deeply embody our faith in Jesus Christ.

Q: Why do you think some Christians are disengaging from politics and political discussions?

A: We have different reasons for disengaging. If this describes you, I am sure you have your own unique reasons why. Maybe you've disengaged because you've come to the opinion that politics and government are evil. Diabolical. It's simply not the place for Christians to be. You stay out of it to focus on things that are holy, as this world is not our ultimate home.

Maybe you have become cynical and even exhausted. Perhaps you more strongly believed in the political process at some point, but no longer. You may see occasional value in political action and advocacy, but time and again you have seen that our political process is broken beyond repair. So, you've decided to instead choose other battles in life, and leave political fights for someone else. I understand. I sometimes feel burned out. Disillusioned. Even discouraged or depressed at times because of politics. But I want to encourage you, believer. Take heart. There is a different way.

Q: What would you say to the Christian who says, "Politics just doesn't matter"?

A: Hear this well: *Politics matter*. They matter because politics informs policies that ultimately impact people. When I read the Bible, *people matter to God*—including and especially people who are marginalized, oppressed, forgotten, and on the fringes of our larger society. While there are some Christians who've chosen to disengage from the political process, remain silent, or retreat to the sidelines, that kind of isolation or retreat from society is not endorsed by this book. I believe Christians ought to engage our larger culture—including the many facets and nuances of what we label "politics."

Q: Does your book deal with specific political policies?

It's not my intent to tell people who to vote for or how to vote on any specific issues—although I'll certainly talk about some issues and why it's so critical to use prayerful discernment through the lens of Scripture and the life of Christ. In other words, the aim is not to be prescriptive on what or who to vote for but rather descriptive in our identity as followers of Christ.

To be a Christ follower is to be faithful amid tension. To stay engaged, to remain hopeful, to love anyway, to walk with integrity, and to bear witness to the love, mercy, and grace of Christ. This is becoming increasingly difficult, but such is our call as followers of Jesus. It's not just merely what we believe but also *how* we engage.

Q: What is the difference between patriotism and nationalism?

A: As believers of Jesus Christ, we are to "seek first the Kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33), not the kingdom of our party or respective country. And since this statement likely will elicit strong pushback and feelings, please note there's a big difference between patriotism and nationalism.

Go ahead, be patriotic. I am! I am an immigrant and a child of parents who were born in what is now called North Korea. When they were children, there was only one Korea before the devastating Korean War separated and divided both a nation and millions of families. We immigrated in 1977 when I was six years old. I am one of the millions of immigrants who made their way to the United States and while my story might be unique, I'm a proud, naturalized American citizen who would be quick to share with others the important distinction between patriotism and nationalism.

Nationalism points to a potentially dangerous view of exceptionalism. For example, the idea of American exceptionalism can be a dangerous guise for American supremacism. In other words, it functions purely through the lens of worldly power and will do anything to obtain or preserve that power. Now imagine the countercultural stories of Jesus Christ, who must be the central figure of our theology, worship, and life. For example, we must remember the story of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples—especially in a cultural context in which teachers of the law instructed Jewish people not to wash the feet of others because it was considered too menial and dirty. Jesus washing feet is truly radical. It is mind blowing and heart transforming.

Q: How do our political views shape our personal identities?

A: Many of us have our favorite politicians and they have their political positions, and by and large, we seem to be comfortable with that arrangement without a ton of other critical thinking. We align with our candidates or our party. As such, sometimes the most passionately held beliefs among Christians may not be informed by

our life-transforming faith in Christ, but instead, originate from our chosen political party or political ideology. Subsequently, the ideology becomes part of our personal identity.

It's quite telling in our culture today that an increasing number of Christians are much more prone to advertise and promote their political leanings and views than share their identities as Christians, let alone, take intentional steps to actually share their faith with others through evangelism.

Q: What do you say to the person who believes Christians should only vote one party?

A: Followers of Jesus should not be in bed with any of the political parties. Even if one affiliates with a particular party, may we maintain a posture to collaborate, listen, hold accountable, and engage the political system all while understanding the political system is not our ultimate hope or answer. In addition, we must never lose the courage or conviction to speak prophetically to a group of people because we are lured by the power associated with politics, a leader, or a political party.

When Christians pledge blind allegiance to a political power and its leaders and cannot be objective about the politician's party is all about, we travel down a dangerous path. We cease to see the world informed first and foremost by the life and teachings of Christ. Instead, when we allow political allegiances to identify us, we distort the Bible to justify our politics and allegiances.

Put another way: this is *idolatry*. Let's allow the Scriptures and our convictions about Christ and the Kingdom of God to inform how we engage the candidates, the political parties, and the election process.

Q: How do believe Christians should navigate the 2020 U.S. Presidential election?

A: We are inundated by politics, party, and power in these confusing times, but this is precisely why we must be about the Kingdom of God. If you feel hazy about what the Kingdom of God looks like, look to Jesus. He's not a domesticated puppet of our worldly power structures. The crucified and risen Christ is Lord and Savior. Indeed, we must keep looking to Jesus. Better yet, we must make sure we don't just admire Him from afar, but actually worship and follow Jesus—His words, His teachings, and His ways—before it's too late.

In today's culture, we can always find some authority, leader, author, blogger, or expert who will affirm our views. But how much more valuable is it for us to first ground ourselves in Christ and His ways? We must see the greatest commandments of loving God and loving our neighbor as what directs the trajectory of our lives, informing all of our decisions. Otherwise, we will be at the mercy of building our lives and ideology on something as ever-changing as shifting sand.

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