



**Pulpits, Pews &
Political Parties
in the U.S.
Who Is Using Who?**

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IN GOD WE TRUSTⁱ

“O Say Can You See...?”

Before anything, I want to sincerely apologize for my inability to avoid unnecessary generalizations in language and pronouns. I didn't intend to paint with a broad brush with my sweeping generalizations, nor did I intend to charge every Dick and Harry for what we all know that only John Doe is responsible for. The sower, in Jesus' parable of the sower, went to his field and scattered his seeds, haphazardly or intentionally, who knows? But the seeds happen to fall on four different kinds of soils, some productive, others not. For lack of a better analogy, that's me. I just pray that some seeds may find the right soil. No harm intended. That being said, apology given and apology accepted, let's start...

The national motto and the slogan on US coinage and currency is: “In God We Trust.” The question that begs asking is: “Which God?” or “Which god?” Could it be the \$dollar\$ itself? Although one might say that the question has been answered definitively in the courts, it is still the subject of an ongoing discussion. And, it should be. The motto, “In God We Trust” should be reexamined, avowed or disavowed, in every generation if that generation is to be true to itself.

What is the number 1 most important issue on their minds as Americans head to the polling booths in any election year? ECONOMY! In good times when the economy is booming, the driving force for the voters is the economy; and in bad times or during economic recession, the voters' number 1 driving force is still the same: economy! It's not healthcare, global warming, climate change, education, or housing. Those are secondary. By far, it's not the credibility, character or moral quality of the men and women whose names are on the ballot papers. Credibility, character or moral quality never comes into consideration when we elect political office holders even though we demand such traits from our coworkers, employers and employees. We give politicians a pass; we afford them the luxury of living by a different set of rules from real, normal people (and maybe some are not real, normal people).

This number 1 driving force, which is the economy or dollar power, may be the clue to the god we have in mind when we say, “In God We Trust.” And there is an advantage to this: A god I can hold in my hand and see with my eyes, and yes, put in my pocket, purse or wallet, is by far much better than one who is invisible; it’s the god I have better control over. Unlike the Judeo-Christian God who is a Spirit and cannot be seen or touched, all we have to do is pick any US currency or coin—dime, nickel, quarter, dollar bill, twenty dollar bill and look, feel, touch, read in bold caps: IN GOD WE TRUST. Here is my suggestion for those who like to call a spade a spade. Just a suggestion, the next you gaze on the bill in your hand come right out and be honest about it and say, IN THIS GOD WE TRUST. To that honesty, I say: “Amen!”

The Church and Politics

Faith is a plus, not a prerequisite when I decide who my primary physician is or when I go to see any specialist as far as my health goes. I also care about competence, credibility, compassion, empathy, honesty, civility and high ethical practices when I need the services of a nurse or medical practitioner. I care about how he/she thinks of me, treats me, and how he/she makes me feel after the office consultation. He or she can be Hinduist, Buddhist, Catholic, Moslem or Christian, if that individual is an expert in the field, I’ll see him or her. In addition, he or she must think of me and relate to me as a human being with dignity. I must know, beyond any shadow of doubt, that he/she is concerned about my total welfare, more than my co-pay and medical insurance bill. I want to believe that you will do the same and look for the same treatment. Why then does religion or faith come in and towers above all other considerations when we think of people to take care of our collective responsibilities and the future of the Earth? I will cast my vote for any politician who scores high on humaneness, caring and competence regardless of his faith or no faith in the same way that I will choose a competent medical practitioner who treats me with dignity regardless of his faith persuasion over a supposed Christian who lacks competence or empathy.

So far so good, I hope. Please go ahead and crucify me for what I am going to say next. Like it or not, religion and faith are deciding factors in US life, which is good and okay. Sadly, when it comes to religion many educated—even seminary educated—Americans shut off the valve to the thinking sector of their brains. (Hey! I already told you to crucify me—so, go ahead.) The most gullible sector of the society is that of the *religious* evangelicals; I decidedly used religious evangelicals than Christian evangelicals. If you don't know the difference between the two, you belong in the former. Church-going Americans have carried Jesus' words, "*He who is not against us is for us*" (Mk. 9:40; Lk. 9:50) to an illogical and ridiculous degree that all a politician needs to say to get the vote from the church-going Christians' bloc is, "I'm also born again," or, "I'm on your side;" regardless of how the politician lives, what he/she inherently believes or stands for by practice, or what he/she does or does not do.

The Christian bloc is eager to save God, or to rescue what they perceive as God's political agenda at all costs—which scares me—because in my theological thinking God does not need saving or rescuing. Yet, we do need saving by God. If their touted "Christian" politicians—their God-anointed men and women in politics—were the faces of Jesus Christ, we are seriously in trouble. The only saving grace is if their gospel is a different gospel—and it really looks like a different gospel. So, relax, we are safe; they don't have a monopoly on Jesus.

I recall the defense of the father of Gideon of his son, after Gideon had destroyed the altar of the false god, Baal. He told the hostile crowd of Baal worshipers eager to revenge, "*Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him [that is, Baal] shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar,*" (Jud. 6:31; NIV). God can fight God's battle by God Himself without human help; we need God to help us fight our battles. We fool only ourselves when we disguise our agendas as God's battles. At a crucial point when Jesus could have flipped the cataclysmic switch to prove who was who, He flatly declared, "*My kingdom is not of this world,*" (Jn. 18:36).

I am not a prophet, but please mark my word: If this country we love so much goes down, it will not be the secularists at fault but the religious bloc. God is gracious and merciful. In most cases, the secularists have and do show grace and mercy—these attributes of God; the religious have and show “something else.” (Kindly forgive my inability to come up with the right word.)

“For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now ‘If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?’” (1 Pet. 4:17, 18).

The most constant synonym that God—and the OT prophets—had for kings and political leaders of Israel is the word, **Shepherd**. It’s the most descriptive of the roles of leaders at every level—family, school, business, church, politics and the armed forces. God Himself is the Shepherd of Israel (Ps. 80:1). Jesus is the good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11-14) who laid down His life for the sheep (Jn. 10:18). God places kings in power so they could shepherd God’s people on God’s behalf, and when they failed, it broke God’s heart. Ezekiel Chapter 34 is a long chapter that details God’s disappointment over irresponsible shepherds—Israel’s leaders and rulers—and, consequently, how God, the true Shepherd, made the commitment to lead and care for His people by Himself. The leaders didn’t have to come from priestly or prophetic lineage and didn’t have to have prophetic gifts or be priestly or prophetic in any shape or version. They just needed to have a shepherd’s heart, as in caring, protecting, preserving, providing, and defending God’s people. There’s only one criterion for leadership role at any level, and there’s only one yardstick for its evaluation: Shepherding!

Here are my two cents, any leader or aspiring political leader who does not understand his/her role as a shepherd, provider and protector of the people under him/her and cannot be described by insiders and outsiders as such has failed in his/her role. Such a person may be my party’s flag bearer (if we belong to the same political party), but even when I vote for him (since we mostly vote on party lines anyway), I will be careful not to endorse him/her as

God's anointed. Politics is not the kingdom of God. It belongs in the realm of the kingdom of this world, and Satan is the god of this world—2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2. We must play politics in its arena and by its rules. You cannot bring golf balls to a basketball court or use the rule of soccer in a football game. We cannot Christianize politics, but we can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Woe betide us if we attempt to Christianize a political group. I don't need a spiritual leader in political office; that's what the church is for. For the country, I need a leader, a gifted visionary leader. I need from a politician the same thing I expect from other mature individual humans, such as

- a person with basic moral decency,
- civility,
- true patriot, not party, agenda or personality-based patriotism,
- good citizenship qualities, as in paying a fair share of taxes and tariffs,
- intelligence will also be desirable,
- humility will be a plus,
- good listener,
- peace loving,
- flexibility, readiness to learn, adapt or reinvent as things change,
- one who is a lover of people,
- a good sense of humor will not hurt,
- humane individual, even if he/she has no professed faith.

Why this rigmarole? Simply because politics is the domain and playing field of the Herods and Caesars of the world and we are commanded to pray for them, and, when we do, the promise that follows is *“that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence”*. When Jesus gave the mandate, *“Go into all the world...”* (Mk. 16:15) He meant that we should go into all the world — all the world of science, all the world of business, all the world of academics, all the world of medicine, all the world of engineering, all the world of politics. Jesus sent us to go into the entire world and represent Him and shine His light into every part of the world. Any world, any part of the world, that we refuse to get into we leave in the hand and

control of the enemy. It is a noble and sacred calling, if one is called to go into politics. The unfortunate part is that many go into politics for the show or for money, because politics is generously endowed with those two.

Back in Nigeria as a pastor, the few times I had been approached by Christians businessmen or intellectuals, not necessarily members of my congregation, who wanted to go seek political office in order to make a change, I was honest and encouraging. I prayed with and encouraged them to go ahead in seeking the political offices but to do so knowing fully well that we were not a theocratic society. They should know, as leaders and political office holders, they would be sitting down with, working together with, seeking the favor and support of, and making compromises with all the people they would be governing, including Christians, Moslems, secularists, occultists, Satanists, majority tribes and minority tribes, team players and zealots, affluent and deprived members of their constituencies; all of whom have a place at the table and a right to be heard. This meant that when issues came before them for their decisions, they would need uncommon wisdom. They would have to make their decisions and policies not solely because of their faith conviction, but because it was agreeable to and considered profitable in some fashion to all and sundry. In no way should they be disrespectful to another person's religious views. Initially, most people thought narrowly of their constituents and few reasoned deeply in the larger context of conflicting national, political and sectarian issues and interests before they decided to get into politics. Here in America by our voting for them we send people into offices, house or senate, so they could represent our political, religious, regional and sectarian interests and to get as many resources as possible for their base from the national pool.

Three times in Romans 13:1-7 Paul refers to rulers: kings, politicians, and emperors as "God's minister," as God-ordained to represent God. That does not make rulers saints or little gods; it makes them accountable stewards to the One and Only Sovereign Ruler. A Christian who feels called into politics should understand that he/she is an intruder; the one who speaks in an unknown

foreign language in board meetings. He/she is the light in the dark places of the State. If they welcome him with a red carpet, he's one of them. However, if they cautiously embrace him or keep a distance, he has a mission; he's a change agent. The successful Christian in politics is God's agent who has intruded into the devil's domain and needs all the prayer and protective coverage of honest pastors and objective church members. I let the Christians aspiring for political office know that they should be assured of my constant prayers for their noble and courageous desire but should not presume on my vote simply because of church membership. Voting my conscience is based on my understanding of their competence and mission, not their faith. Faith is a bonus point. Even when unsolicited for, if I consider the person incompetent or inexperienced for the position—a square peg in a round hole—for conscience sake, I still volunteer my candid opinion.

Presidents and political leaders of the nations of the world, by virtue of the power of their position and office, hold the key to the advancement of the Kingdom of God in their country. In addition, they hold the key to the welfare, health and peace of the people they govern. The Bible says, *“When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people groan,”* (Prov. 29:2). By their policies, they may allow or disallow free flow of information and movement of people, including the preaching of the gospel and permitting missionaries to stay in their country. They may be tyrannical, selfish and uncaring to their own people by their draconian rules, and they may act like true shepherds and look after the poor and vulnerable under them. They may be hostile to religion and restrictive to anything religious, and they may be open-minded, tolerant and hospitable. The laws and practices of any particular land, nation or bloc of nations may impede or accelerate missionary efforts in that part of the world. That's why Paul enjoins us to pray for them, *“that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence,”* and *“that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified,”* (2 Thess. 3:1). As we pray for leaders who wield political power, Proverbs 21:1 assures us: *“The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.”* No one understood this better than the repentant pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar. He was forced to admit this when he said, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor

the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. AND THOSE WHO WALK IN PRIDE HE IS ABLE TO PUT DOWN,” (Dan. 4:37; emphasis mine).

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, (1 Tim. 2:1-4)

God is not a registered voter, and God does not always speak through our votes. It is imperative for us to do our civic duty and exercise our right to vote and participate in the electioneering process. If God does speak through our votes, that is, if our voting system is engineered by Heaven, that would have made God the Master Manipulator, because you and I know very well, that scheming, lies, devious cheating, and manipulations—all of which belong in the territory of politics and politicking—play the higher roles in our electoral system, as it is in every country of the world. God is not into the game of scheming, lies, devious cheating, and manipulations, but Satan, the god of this world, is the governor of that domain. God gives us free will to make choices in our personal lives, such as who to marry or what career to pursue, believing that God is guiding us as we work and pray. Even when we miss it for whatever reason, Romans 8:28 assures us that God can always reroute and work with our mess to bring out a good result in the end. Likewise, in our national and political life, God gives us the free will to choose our leaders. We do not always get things right, and Romans 8:28 again assures us that God can still refuel and pilot the ship of the nation to achieve the most good. If the OT makes anything clear to us, especially in 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, it is that every king or political leader was not God-sent, or God-ordained but God was still superintendent in all things and worked through all situations; for God “*works all things according to the counsel of His will,*” (Eph. 1:11). Sometimes, God’s prophets rebuke or yell at us, as in, Hosea 8:4a and 13:11:

“They set up kings, but not by Me; They made princes, but I did not acknowledge them,” (8:4a), implying that God disavowed the choice and distanced Himself from the coronation ceremonies. The king was the people’s choice, not God’s deputy on the earthly throne.

“I gave you a king in My anger, And took him away in My wrath,” (13:11), indicating that God did not simply claim to be king-maker who enthroned or dethroned but that certain kings were given or taken away as deserving punishment for the people—the product of a holy God’s anger and wrath.

By the way, this whole subtitle, “The Church and Politics” is a small talk from a man who has reputation for missing his routes because he is using, or in spite of the fact that he is using, 3 GPS devices at the same time. Read my small talk “The Church and Politics” one more time and then dump it into the trash tray where it belongs, or simply forget it! (As an aside, though I had given you permission to crucify me if I rubbed you in the wrong way, you really cannot crucify a dead man because, long before you and I showed up, I had been crucified and died with Christ—Rom. 6:6-8; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3).

Let Me See A Sermon Rather Than Hear One

I am sorry if I leave you with any impression that I don’t like politicians or that I dislike politics. It’s not true. As I said somewhere earlier, all of life is political. Politics has its tentacles on everything including the cost of groceries, postage stamps, transportation systems, schools and parks in the neighborhood, and the nearest firehouse or hospital to where you live. Every fiber of day-to-day life is an expression of your faith or belief system. If your belief system suggests that human beings are animals of the highest hierarchy in the animal kingdom, flesh and blood for whom the grave is final, you will act and behave like one and treat your neighbor same way. If your belief system suggests that human beings come from a divine source with eternity etched in their souls, are created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore have inherent God-endowed dignity, you will behave and act like it and treat your neighbor same way. We function from the basic tenets of our belief system. My point is that

without Bible bumper stickers on our car, and a giant Bible on display in the office, a Christian lapel pin or brooch, or occasional shouts of “glory, halleluiah,” our faith should speak louder and testify to Whom we belong to and Whom we truly serve by the Christian attitude and spirit of grace that pervade us. Our Christian demeanor and influence, the way we love and treat people, our humble spirit, how we appreciate grace and extend grace are more important than how or for whom we vote and should be the things that dominate our conversation around issues. Edgar A. Guest’s poem comes to mind, “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.” One of the statements most commonly ascribed to St. Francis of Assisi is, “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” We cannot preach the good news if we ourselves are bad news. Unfortunately, many Christians are a bad press for Jesus.

For example, my wife works in a Stewart’s shop. She didn’t get the job because she’s a Christian but hardly would any regular or occasional customer leave the shop without an inkling of her spirituality. First, she’s pretty; I mean she’s cute and very beautiful in every sense of the word. Then she has a warm, pleasant, friendly personality. It’s hard to tell if this is a natural or Christian trait because of the fact that she’s been a Christian since her early teens—all of which are positive pluses for customer service. I lie not: Her facial muscles have been divinely choreographed to flash a welcoming smile, which reveals her set of very white teeth below the soft eyes peering at you. She works mainly as an opener, which means she gets to work at 3:30 am (Yeah! Poor me!) to get the store ready for customers. While she’s multitasking in the early hours of the day, cooking, brewing coffee, stocking, and all that, she has her phone playing her Christian devotional music. Before she opens the door to customers, her phone is put away in her bag and stored in the office; not strapped to her side while she’s at work. If you call her phone during working hours, she’ll miss your call. The only time she gets to her phone is during her break time. For the rest of the day or week, her phone is permanently on “silent,” even at home. If she sees your missed call, she’ll call you back at her own convenient time. Did I tell you her name? Her name, displayed on her Stewart’s nametag, is Praise: as in Praise the Lord!

With no Bible on display or Christian brooch or lapel pin on her, countless customers have asked if she is a Christian and what church she attends and what kind of parents gave her the name, Praise. Like we all do or should do, she does her work as unto the Lord, not to human beings (Eph. 6:7; Col. 3:23) and for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). She let her faith speak for her in a transparent manner. Many early customers tell her she brightens their day; some say seeing her helps to set a positive tone for the rest of their day. During the pre-Covid-19 era, some asked for a hug. Those going through health challenges and personal crisis ask for her prayers. Many look forward to seeing her claiming that the brief cashier-customer interaction in the morning helps to boost their mood for the day than the stimulant in the cup of coffee they walk out with. As for some partner-craving, lonely single men even after she proudly calls their attention to her wedding ring on her finger they still walk away on a hopeful note, asking her to remember them if, for whatever reason, her marriage should hit the rocks. (Here is putting such men on notice. I have the Holy Ghost, but I don't own a gun—yet! Don't make me rush to Walmart for it on a whim.)

One of the Saddest Days of My Life

I was in a middle school in Parkside Avenue, Brooklyn, NY. I'm a NYS permanent certified, science teacher in biology/general science, 7-12. I taught both middle school and high school inner city kids. Back then we had what we called, "Do Now" at the beginning of the class. It's a set of few questions or brainteasers, from the last or prior lessons, to jolt their brain, bring them up to par, and set the tone for the lesson for the day. It's like a quick reminder and also serves to calm the students as they settle for the class. I was walking around the room to be sure everyone was on task and checking the progress of the "Do Now" when Mr. Hernandez, Spanish/Social Studies teacher, walked in. He had been in the classroom earlier that day and had forgotten an item. After he retrieved his item he turned to the class and, out of the blue, asked, "Do you know Mr. O. is a pastor?" I looked at him as if I just woke up from a deep sleep; the students in the class looked bewildered, too. He continued, "You mean he didn't tell you? He's a pastor; an ordained minister." As he

walked to the door, he turned again to the class and said for emphasis, “Padres,” and then he walked out. I knew he meant well but the outcome was the exact opposite of whatever he had had in mind.

I walked to the next group of students in the cooperative learning setting, and they all—as if it’d been rehearsed, moved back from me. One after another said, “Don’t come near me.” I walked to another set, and it’s the same treatment, “Mr. O., back off.” The class clown shouted from across the room, “Mr. O. Do you like boys?” I retorted, “Will you please face your work? What has that got to do with what we are doing?” Yet, he wouldn’t let up. “Mr. O. Just answer me. It’s a question: Do you like boys?” I didn’t know where this was going, so to dismiss it and continue with the work of the day I said, “Yes! I like boys and I like girls too. I like both genders equally. Now can we go back to the work?” “Yes!” he pumped his shoulders as if he had scored a point. He continued, “I know! You like boys. Mr. O., you are a priest, you like boys. Priests like boys.” I couldn’t circulate the room, as my practice was, because nobody wanted me close to them, especially the boys. They now considered me a potential pedophilia, because I had the identity of being a priest. Before Mr. Hernandez volunteered the unnecessary information, it was okay for me to bend over and inspect their works. Now, coming too close to inspect a student’s work was considered risky because, now, I was a dangerous person to them. Words soon spread to other students in other classes. From then on, for most days when I walked the aisles in the classrooms, the students eagerly shifted and created plenty of space between us before I approached them as if I was carrying an infectious disease. The day that young kids saw a priest and didn’t bow and ask for a prayer but quickly dispersed and ran away from him, that’s one of the saddest days of my entire life.

The Stewardship of Being Blessed and Privileged

Incidentally, if Nigeria and the US were fairly assessed, judged and compared to what each country could be in her best version, rather than compared to other nations, the story is not too different for the US, socially and politically. It’s a question of “different strokes

for different folks,” a saying first credited to the boxer, Muhammad Ali. It’s frustrating holding conversation with visitors and those who’ve never stepped foot on US soil because of their Christo-crat, scenic or picturesque view of the country. In my discussions with those who see a flawless “America—God’s own country,” I’ve sometimes had to ask them this question: Which America and Americans are you talking about? The First World America and Americans we see on Wall Street, movies and on the television talk shows? Or, the Fourth World America, the sidelined Americans living in slums, ghettos, and high-rise apartment houses that do not make the headlines? The question becomes necessary for clarification so we can be on the same page. Noticeably, there are two distinct social groups amongst “We The People” of “the land of the free, the home of the brave.” Someone gifted with words said some are citizens while the rest are subjects. It is a subtle caste system, but it is one, nonetheless.

White, Black, Green or Blue, to be rich and privileged is neither a crime nor a sin—it is a blessing, a trust and stewardship. I can say I’m blessed and favored and could probably be in the privileged class, depending on the definition and parameters you use. However, to abuse, misuse or become selfish with the blessing and lose sight of trust and stewardship part of it, while it does not rise to the level of a crime in society because it’s been renamed capitalism, it has crossed the line and become a sin in the eyes of a holy God, “*the Most High [who] rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses,*” (Dan. 4:32e). When anyone (or any nation) who is entrusted with power and position that come with privilege and affluence is devoid of grace and generosity, he or she (or that nation) becomes the oppressor or a despot (or despotic) by default.

Cornelius, the Roman centurion we read about in Acts 10, was a privileged man in a privileged position. Yet, he was not devoid of grace. On the contrary, he was generous and gracious to a point that the heavens noticed. Cornelius had influence, power and leverage and he held them as a trust. He added value to others—his family members as well as those who served under him. He was also a deeply religious man. “*He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly,*” (vs. 2, NIV). He

was a Gentile and his family became the first Gentiles to hear the good news of Jesus and salvation by grace. God sent an angel to Cornelius with a message from God that sounded to me more like a divine report card. It reads: *“Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God,”* (Acts 10:4; NIV). Cornelius prayed, (the fruit of his heart and lips) but he also gave to the poor (the fruit of his labor, from his paycheck), to the less privileged. God saw and took notice of both. Please come with me: Let’s revisit an old story.

In Jesus’ story, which we call “The Story of the Good Samaritan,” the Priest and Levite were not the perpetrators of a crime and were in no way responsible for the victim’s misfortune. They saw the victim, their fellow Jew, who had been robbed of his livelihood and stabbed nearly to death, lying in his pool of blood and walked past him on the other side. They did not become involved because, based on their understanding of the Laws of their God, they had legitimate reasons to avoid the risk of becoming defiled from contact with blood, the dead or dying while they pursued their sacred duties to man and God (Lev. 21:1; Num. 19:11; Lam. 4:14). Yet why do we still blame them, or think less of them? I can only guess. I guess it may be because, though they were not the criminals, they did not use their privileged position which was a trust to help another person. It could be that they failed to recognize that the value of a soul—White, Black, Green or Blue life—was more important and valuable than the pursuit of their religious duty and even much more important and valuable than their fanatical obedience to purity laws. I pray that God may have mercy on the privileged to whom the victims of man’s inhumanity have become invisible and whose fanatical use of the Bible and self-justifications have dimmed their sight to their sacred trust, and much more to the most important things—human life created in God’s image and likeness.

On Whose Side is God—With the Oppressed or their Oppressors?

Susanna Wesley, mother of nineteen children who were blessings to the world and Christendom (amongst her children were John

Wesley, founder of Methodism and Charles Wesley, prolific poet and author of 6000 hymns), was asked which child she loved most. She said it was the child who was sick or infirm and needed more attention, more time, more TLC—tender loving care, until he/she was well enough. It was not that she loved any one child more, but while she had equal love for all her children the one needing her most for his/her frailty at any particular time got the most attention. While all lives matter—White, Black, Green or Blue—the color that’s been most deprived, maligned and diseased in the process [as in *dis*-eased, or “No Longer At Ease” (a book title by Chinua Achebe)] and urgently needs attention from all is the marginalized Black race, the so-called minority.

For example, it is a fact known to all that many young black men and women are incarcerated and are languishing in US jails, not for any real crime that they’ve committed but because of the color of their skins, the paltry family income, and the zip codes of their residence. Hear this: the business of incarceration or human warehousing, the product of a broken penal system, is “good” for the economy. Yes, it’s very good for *their* economy because it provides jobs for thousands of men and women. Many communities and counties that would otherwise have been bankrupt are sustained by the prison system. If you had to resort to trumping up charges to get offenders into prisons to maintain the quota, then why not? Therefore, the more the merrier. Not to talk of countless innocent lives that have been snuffed out due to police brutality and never had a day in court. Is human life so dispensable and disposable just for the color of the skin? *“He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”* (Mic. 6:8).

On whose side is God—with the oppressed or their oppressors? You cannot read your Bible without coming across a recurrent theme of God’s care and concern for the vulnerable, the widows, the orphans, the fatherless, the strangers, the defenseless, the poor and homeless (Exo. 22:21-24; Deut. 10:18; 14:28, 29; Ps. 10:14; 27:10; 68:5; Jam. 1:7). If Jesus were to throw a party, whom do you suspect He would invite? King Herod and the Pharisees or the common people, the hungry and outcast? At this point in human history, it

should be a thing of joy and pride for all humans with 23 pairs of chromosomes (that is, anyone who makes the cut to be considered normal human—not *subhuman* or *superhuman*) to turn attention to the black race to find ways to remedy the injustices of the past, reverse the present trend, celebrate the dignity of human life, stand up for humanity, and for what is right, because BLACK LIVES MATTER! The good news is that we cannot lift or advance one human soul or one race without lifting and advancing all humanity along with it. We cannot trample or tread on one individual or race without bringing down the whole of humanity along with it. Together we rise or fall, because we are one human race: *Homo sapiens* in one floating ship called planet Earth.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (Declaration of Independence, In Congress, July 4, 1776).

“Holding Up the Mirror”—Jesus’ Parable to the Church-going Evangelicals

There is a parable of Jesus that’s most difficult to understand or easily explained and seems to be out of character with Jesus. Sometimes we read more into it; sometimes we dance around it. No one can really succinctly explain or interpret it. You need too many words to consider it from all sides and angles, and at the end, more is said than is helpful. It is the parable of the dishonest servant in Luke 16:1-9. Many have attempted to interpret it in the context of the preceding story/parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man that immediately follows it in 16:19-31.

I will suggest a subtitle for it and ask you to read it through the filter of that subtitle. The long subtitle is: **Jesus Holding Up the Mirror through Jesus’ Parable of the Dishonest Steward to the Church-going Evangelicals and Asking—Who is the Pawn? Who is Being Played?** I will like the parable to speak for itself,

because I want to believe that Jesus told the parable for the church-going evangelicals of America. Please stay with me. I have struggled with the passage, like any other diligent Bible student. However, as soon as I came up with the idea I have suggested, the parable became clearer to me. I am not here claiming perfect understanding and application of the parable; in fact, I think we should suspect anyone who claims that. I'm however satisfied with holding a position that it's not about how we interpret the parable; it's about how the parable interprets us.

The problem is: If it is a story, what's the moral? It's hard to find. And, if it is a parable, then what heavenly truth does it illustrate about the kingdom of God? It's still hard to find, unless we read into the passage what it does not appear to be saying. That's why I have come to believe that the purpose of the parable was not to read, analyze or interpret it, but rather that the parable itself might read, interpret and analyze us. One of the skills in a therapist or counselor's toolbox is "holding up the mirror." That is, to help the counselee see a reflection of himself in the mirror and see how his habits and actions are destroying his life and relationships and what his actions are doing to those who love him. Holding up the mirror is saying, "Look at yourself," "See a true reflection of yourself," "See who you are—as you are." "See the person you've become; is that who you truly are, or who you really want to be?"

The employer in the parable is not God because of his own dubious and shady character. Interpreters struggle with the words of commendation from the employer and Jesus' later commentary on it (vs. 8, 9). Interpreters do their best to make sense of it, consistent with what they know about Jesus and other parts of the Bible. The employee or manager was dishonest and fired. His case was so hopeless he was not given a second chance or retrained for a different job. Unfortunately, he had no other skill than being hired as a steward, for which he had done a poor job, not worthy of commendation. Yet he manipulated the system such that even when he was fired and jobless and never worked again the rest of his life, he had so manipulated and taken advantage of the system that he was settled for life. He determined and designed his own severance package. Dishonestly led to being fired, shrewdness led him to take

the maximum advantage of the system. If that does not read like the modus operandi of some, not all, but definitely some 21st century politicians and political office holders to you, then I don't know on what planet you live.

In the parable, I see three groups. One was the employer and as we said, due to his nature, he couldn't be God. Let's make the employer the State, House or Senate, Buckingham Palace or the White House. Second, the manager or steward who was dishonest and fired, but smart enough that, win or lose, he still came on top. Let's call him a politician. True politicians never really lose, because even when they do not win, they still come out on top and are better off than before they contested. Their opponents call them losers, but they give more interviews and are paid to give speeches. They gain new visibility and publicity. They lose the battle but go home with the booties of the war. If all else fails, they write a book about their failure or scandal and make millions of dollars in the process. The third group is the debtors with which the manager made arrangements. Let's call them the people or the system. While the debtors thought the manager was on their side and was helping to renegotiate for them to pay off their debts, little did they know that they were just tools. The man was actually working for himself. The manager had said in his exit plan, "when I'm turned out into the street, people will take me into their houses," (vs. 4), meaning that he will eat and live off them for the rest of his life. His whole idea of renegotiation and scaling down their debt was eventually to set up a parasitic relationship in which he's the bloodsucking leech and they are the host. In the opening verse, we read that some people brought the complaints to the employer (vs. 1). Who do you suppose they were? I surmise that the same people who reported him to his boss were the same people he negotiated with and the very same people he's going to feed on for life. Is it becoming clearer to you now? Three groups: 1) The State, Senate or White House; 2) the scrupulous, conniving politician, who when you thought was on your side, was actually lining his pockets at your expense; 3) the people or the system, hardworking taxpayers, plain folks who are trusting, gullible, naïve, vulnerable and credulous. They are like pawns in the manager's chessboard.

Here is where it gets interesting. Note that it is a parable about holding up the mirror for us to see who we really are in the scheme of things, especially in the political arena. It is a parable I have come to understand that Jesus used for the church-going evangelicals to look in the mirror, through the lens of the parable and then ask the question: WHO IS THE PAWN? Who is being used? Who is serving the kingdom and which kingdom? Who is being taken advantage of? The parable will follow as told in the Message Bible. It will conclude this piece. As you read, think of the three groups: 1) the State or political office, which by nature is amoral, depending on who occupies the position, and at the same time, like the employer, it's inherently full of cracks and open to abuse, 2) the con artist, the tactician, twofaced politician who is represented by the dishonest manager who was fired and still got the best of the deal because he could manipulate the system, and 3) the people or the system, represented by the debtors, overburdened, hard-working tax payers desperate for any relief, who thought they were gaining not realizing that they had been scammed and roped into a Ponzi scheme. The question to ask as you read is "Who is the pawn?" Now, read the parable:

The Story of the Crooked Manager (or The Parable of the Unjust Steward)

Luke 16:1-2 Jesus said to his disciples, "There was once a rich man who had a manager. He got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses. So he called him in and said, 'What's this I hear about you? You're fired. And I want a complete audit of your books.'

3-4 "The manager said to himself, 'What am I going to do? I've lost my job as manager. I'm not strong enough for a laboring job, and I'm too proud to beg. . . . Ah, I've got a plan. Here's what I'll do . . . then when I'm turned out into the street, people will take me into their houses.'

5 “Then he went at it. One after another, he called in the people who were in debt to his master. He said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

6 “He replied, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’

“The manager said, ‘Here, take your bill, sit down here—quick now—write fifty.’

7 “To the next he said, ‘And you, what do you owe?’

“He answered, ‘A hundred sacks of wheat.’

“He said, ‘Take your bill, write in eighty.’

8-9 “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

Conclusion:

In the scheme of things, between 1) the employer (State or Buckingham Palace), 2) the dishonest and fired manager or steward or conniving politician (President or Prime Minister) and 3) the debtors, the overburdened, desperate tax payers, the commoners, the card carrying voters, the credulous, unsuspecting church-going evangelical, who was the pawn? Who had the short end of the stick?

Jesus says in the parable, “*Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits,*” (MSG). “*For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light,*” (vs. 8b). I may and I may not have made my point but what I really want to pass across is that politicians are

smarter than us and even when we think the relationship is mutually beneficial, we've been conned beyond comprehension and don't even know it. Being conned, scammed and taken advantage of is not the worst part; it is the loss of our credibility (because we are just like the world and dependent on the world's system). The far worst part is the possibility of losing our souls in the process.

Politicians are in no way our saviors; Jesus is the Savior. Politicians, world, national and local leaders, need our prayers more than ever, that they might not be influenced to make laws that hinder the propagation of the gospel or promote heinous persecutions. Men and women in political offices, especially those who are believers and those not averse to faith and religion, do need our prayers that they may use their office to keep the doors open (Col. 4:3) and further relax restrictive rules. Political office holders, who are our friends and church members, do deserve our extra prayer for their protection and safety, for wisdom and discernment of the world's subtle traps, that they may be able to withstand the constant onslaught of the enemy, and overcome the negative forces around them so they can make both Christ and the church proud. And those leaders who are hostile and antagonistic and even openly pose as enemies of the gospel, could be the enemies and haters that Jesus had in mind when He commanded, *"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,"* (Matt. 5:44).

"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land," (2 Chr. 7:14).

ADDENDUM

I wrote this piece in September/October 2020, before the November 3, presidential election. Little did I know how my fears would come true. For obvious reasons, from what you've read, for a long time I had stopped watching Christian TV channels because many Christian leaders espouse their political views with a "Thus says the Lord" approach. I listen to or watch my favorite preachers and/or their televised church services on YouTube. Happily, there are quite some Evangelical/Pentecostal preachers who respect their audiences'/members' different political views. Shortly after November 3 and after the tally of electoral votes, I turned on YouTube and I saw a video of "Prophets who Got it right, and those who didn't." It was heartbreaking to watch a collection of the video clips of Pastors and Televangelists who had prophesied political results in favor of their political leanings and to listen to their fervent prayers before, during and post-election for God to vindicate their prophetic utterances. The list included the big names and household faces on Christian TV since the 70s until now. How can anyone blame the world for making fun of us? If this was the OT—Deuteronomy 13—they would be stoned to death for prophesying lies in the name of the Lord and claiming and validating their self-induced dreams and visions as "the Word from the Lord."

PS

For four decades or more, I've been publishing under the names: Michael O. Ojewale. For some reason, I consider this two-volume-work (*Nigeria's 60 Tumultuous Years, 1960-2020 & Pulpits, Pews and Political Parties in US*), a duty, my civic duty and spiritual responsibility, and that's why I choose Chaplain M. Ojewale. Although the piece is not out of character, I want to understand it as my contribution and my duty to both my birth and adoptive countries—Nigeria and the USA.

ENDNOTE

ⁱ It was never my intention to get into politics, and definitely not US politics, beyond casting my vote and discussing the politics of the day under my roof with my wife. As far as I am concerned, my wife is the only safe person with whom I could do that, and under my roof is the only safe place where I could do it. However, Covid-19 gave me a prolonged down time. My only pastime is running my fingers on the keyboard of a word processor. That was what I was doing—engaging in my pastime—until I became aware that something else might be happening and my attention was drawn to John 3:8—“The wind blows where it wishes...” I thought I might have been caught up by the Wind and might be gliding on the Wind. I hope I was. I’d better be right, because if I was not, I have no other way to justify what I’ve done. If it had been intentional, as a Christian writer, it would have been infused with Scriptures and it would have a portion focused on the elephant in the room at this time, which is, Covid-19. If my wife is the only friend I have after this, so be it.