

Tempted by the favors of power

White Christians supported Trump by large margins. They should be careful what they accept in return.

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Donald Trump has all but designated Christianity as his administration's favored religion. This worries me as a priest and as a citizen.

I understand that the president is attempting to reward white Christians, who supported him by large margins while most of the rest of the country was voting for Hillary Clinton. But his gifts will only corrupt us—or, more accurately, keep us from repenting of the sins of privilege and complicity that corrupted us long ago.

Case in point: the president's executive order suspending the refugee resettlement program and restricting immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries. The order would close our borders to desperately vulnerable people, many of whom have already done great service to our country. It flies in the face of biblical teaching and is an affront to the example of Christ, especially because it includes an exception for religious minorities living in the seven named countries. In an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network, Trump acknowledged this exception was intended to help Christians.

We should not mistake a bribe for a gift. We are being asked to sacrifice our principles for a special place at Trump's table.

Conservative Christian pressure on Trump to issue an executive order on religious liberty presents a similar conflict. The order would purport to protect the religious liberty of Christians, but it would come at the expense of our fellow citizens who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender—many of whom are Christians themselves. I do not believe that our religious liberties are in peril. Rather, I believe that some religious leaders who wish to continue to receive federal funds while ignoring anti-discrimination laws have found this claim to be a handy shield. Nothing in the life or teachings of Jesus of Nazareth suggests that Christians are entitled to promote their own interest at the expense of others. Rather the opposite.

The president's promise to repeal the Johnson amendment, reiterated at the National Prayer Breakfast, is also a poisoned favor. If religious organizations can campaign for political candidates while maintaining their tax-exempt status, they will be able to benefit from barely disguised political contributions. The faith community's ability to speak God's truth to political power will be eroded as the line between church money and state money disappears and is replaced with a cadre of preachers satisfying their paymasters.

It is jarring but clarifying to juxtapose the position in which American Christians find themselves with the life of Jesus. As a child, he was forced to flee his country to escape a murderous king. As an adult, he was deemed an enemy of the state, tortured, and put to death. The political powers of his day regarded him as a threat from the moment he was born, the Gospels tell us, and they finally succeeded in killing him.

Christianity ceased to be a threat to state power when the Holy Roman Empire became holy. Through the centuries, the church has blessed and facilitated and advanced repressive, racist, and anti-Semitic teachings; tyrannical rulers; and overt acts of violence. American Christians may believe that the church has outlived its complicity with historical thrones and dominions. But we face temptation when we align ourselves, for purposes of power or pageantry, with the state—no matter who is in the White House or statehouse. As a member of the Episcopal Church—historically, the church of the governing class—I know a bit about this temptation.

The particular danger that Trump presents to the country and to Christians is his willingness to pit groups of Americans against one another—to see society as a zero-sum game in which for one party to rise, another must fall. When Christians embrace such a worldview, they betray the essence of their faith. One cannot reconcile the notion that every person is created in the image and likeness of God with the practice of creating scapegoats based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender. One cannot reconcile nationalism of any sort with the universal love of God.

Before Jesus began his public ministry, he went into the wilderness. He was tempted there with visions of all the glories that could be his, if only he would abandon the mission God was calling him to fulfill. To be clear, I am not equating the president with the one that did the tempting. But Jesus had the faith and the wisdom to say no. Contemporary Christians must say no, too.