

Does God want America to be great?

Six reflections on what God really wants for the world

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February 6, 2025



Century illustration

As he stepped to the podium to deliver a prayer at the inauguration of Donald J. Trump, Franklin Graham addressed the 47th president directly: “Mr. President, the last four years, there were times I’m sure you thought it was pretty dark, but look what God has done!”

And what exactly did God do?

President Trump later answered the question: “Just a few months ago, in a beautiful field, an assassin’s bullet ripped through my ear. But I felt then and believe even more so now that my life was saved for a reason. I was saved by God to make America great again.”

[I’ve written about the unquestioned theological premises at play in this claim](#)—God’s ability to intervene in the laws of nature, or the wisdom of God’s decision to let an assassin fire a bullet in the first place. (If he’s going to intervene miraculously anyway, why not do so a few seconds earlier and prevent the entire thing from happening? Why let the firefighter die? What kind of intervention is this?!) But there’s an even more obvious theological premise smuggled into Trump’s claim that deserves our attention. It’s so obvious that it almost seems silly to ask.

Does God really want America to be great?

I’ve learned by now that whenever “God’s will” is brought into political discussions, those discussions quickly break down. This is because usually “what God wants” is, luckily enough, a carbon copy of what the politician talking wants. People of different political persuasions have different ideas and so, therefore, does their God. “God,” in this game, is little more than a rubber stamp. The morality or value of a proposal no longer needs to be defended—the name of God does all the work for the politician.

Still, I think it’s possible to talk in general terms about what God wants because, after all, we Christians believe that God has made and makes his will known to us via scripture, church teaching, and our own consciences. So while I don’t think it’s possible to ground a political platform in what God wants, I do think it’s possible to reflect on what God wants for the world God loves.

That’s a good place to start.

God loves this world, and God wants this world to have a future. The trouble is that empires have a tendency to forget about the world’s future and instead focus on their own. Consider “America First” rhetoric, which suggests that power for Trump is a zero-sum game. He wants it. All of it. This comports with Angela Merkel’s assessment of Trump’s approach to global politics, which she says makes collaboration difficult. “He wants to be the sole winner in any type of conflict, and he does not believe in any win-win situation where both sides benefit from a solution.”

But if the world is to have a future, then countries must work together to courageously tackle climate change, to share resources, and to ensure that nuclear apocalypse doesn't happen.

Second, God wants the world to be ruled by just rulers—and so do God's people. There are plenty of examples of this in scripture, but let's take one. Here are the first four verses of Psalm 72, a Royal Psalm.

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.

May he judge your people with righteousness
and your poor with justice.

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
And the hills, in righteousness.

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.

God wants just rulers to rule so that God's people can thrive. Power ought to be used to improve people's lives, and God is clear about which lives ought to be improved first: the powerless, the needy, the poor, and the stranger, victims of tragedy, those without any recourse to improve their own lives. In today's world, this category of people includes migrants and refugees as well as Appalachian opioid addicts. God doesn't prefer the unlucky to the lucky because he is picky-choosy with his love—like a good mom, all of God's kids are his favorite. But God pays particular attention to the unlucky because they need a little extra help. The rich aren't worried about their daily bread; they pay cooks to worry about that for them.

Third, God does not always share our estimation of greatness so it doesn't make sense to talk about God wanting us to be great. The God of scripture is a god who has his eye on the lowly, the poor, the oppressed. The great, in contrast, he passes over, sometimes even thwarting their plans. This instinct of God's—the instinct to relativize human standards of greatness—is given voice in Mary's magnificat: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" (Luke

1:52). In other words, any politicians who praise their own greatness ought to remember that God “deposes kings and sets up kings” (Daniel 2:21).

Scripture extends God’s illogical logic to nations. Even though God had powerful empires to choose from—Babylon, Egypt, Rome—he chose Israel. “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you,” Moses reminds them, “for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deuteronomy 7:7). What this suggests is that God isn’t impressed by great nations or great numbers.

Fourth, even if God does choose to make a nation great—as he does for Abraham’s descendants in Genesis 12—he does so *for the sake of the world*. Israel’s greatness, as scripture insists, is for the blessing “for all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12:3). Any nation claiming that God has blessed it with greatness ought to ask itself what it’s using that greatness *for*. I don’t get the impression that the MAGA crowd hopes to use their “greatness” to make other nations great. To modify a teaching from St. Aquinas, the excess of a country’s greatness belongs to the poor. This leads me to a fifth conclusion:

God is a social being; his divinity consists in the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity. If we are made in his image, then we, too, are constituted by the relationships we are always already entangled in. Who am I without my husband, without my parents, without my sisters? Take away my nieces and nephews, my godchildren, my students, my friends—what “me” is left? Human beings simply were not designed to go it alone; we cannot cut ourselves off from others and expect to survive. And it won’t do to extend our love, as J. D. Vance’s recent comments seem to imply, merely to those in our closest circles. What is the reward, Jesus might ask, of loving only those who love us? Christian love is frivolous and indiscriminate. Prodigal, even. It sets tables; it doesn’t build walls. The rhetoric of isolationism does not have a place in God’s kingdom, where even the isolation of enemies is overcome by the healing force of love.

Finally, as Origen put it, Jesus is the *autobasileia*, or the self-kingdom. What he means is that we catch a glimpse of God’s kingdom by paying attention to Jesus. He is the clearest example Christians have of the kind of future God wants. Granted, Jesus did not leave us instructions for running governments. Some of his teachings aimed to show us how to respond to or retaliate against unjust rule. But by and large, Jesus was focused not on empires but neighborhoods. And a

neighborhood is any place I am given the choice to become someone's neighbor (i.e. any place I happen upon).

I say this because I want to be clear that I don't think our politicians need to be Christians. I don't care if the president is a Christian. But I care if a Christian is a Christian. And if a politician is going to be a Christian, and if he is going to talk about the Christian God, and if his supporters are going to claim that the Christian God is using said politician to make the country great, well then I have a very basic expectation of him and them—that they talk like people who follow (or at the very least *are familiar with*) Jesus.

Whenever Christians ask ourselves what God wants, our first instinct should be to point to Jesus. *He* is what God wants: his way of being, his way of loving, his way of becoming neighbor to any and all. According to Jesus, God doesn't want people to want to be first—if they do, God is going to send them to the back of the line. According to Jesus, God doesn't want people to welcome strife and division into their lives, nor does he want them to pass by helpless victims they stumble by on the side of the road. According to Jesus, God wants this world to be the kind of place he knows it can be, the kind of place he created it to be: a place where justice rushes down like waters, where enemies are loved, where orphans and widows are welcomed and taken care of by the powerful, where people pursue peace, where actions are informed by compassion.

To be fair, these goals are much more easily achieved by citizens than kings (which might be one reason why Jesus doesn't talk about the Kingdom's King—the Kingdom of God will be run by its people). It's far easier for me to feed a homeless person than for a government to do it; I can act without creating committees, calling votes, filing paperwork, etc. But the question we've been reflecting on is whether God wants America to be great in the way that my MAGA friends claim, and my best guess is that God wants his world to become all that he hopes it can. But if that world is to truly happen, our powerful rulers will have to worry less about being great and more about being good. Here they might heed the words of Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with the Lord your God?"