

Jesus, American Politics, and Bearing God's Name

Have you ever wondered how to engage in politics as a Christian? How do you filter what our political leaders say through the lens of scripture? How do you determine if someone in a political office just wants your vote and is willing to misuse scripture to do it? Tom Davis addresses the concerns we should have when our political leaders misuse scripture, how to identify their crafty lies, and how to think theologically when listening and evaluating their promises on their political platform.

I started paying attention to politics around the year 2000. Since then, politics has grown more contentious. The two major parties are suspicious of each other, and the rhetoric has grown even more contentious. Every president elected since 2000 has been declared to be an illegitimate president by some of their opponents. Most political pundits and activists increase the contention, especially during election campaigns. The worst part of this political polarization is that both parties claim Jesus is on their side. How can Jesus be on both sides? What is their evidence that confirms their claim? How should Christians respond?

The Third Commandment: Taking God's Name in Vain

To help us address how politicians use the name of Jesus, it will help to look at the third commandment. The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. God leads the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, and makes a covenant with His people. In Exodus 20, God gives these commandments as the conditions of His covenant with the Hebrews. In Deuteronomy, these commandments are restated as

the Hebrews are preparing to go into the promised land. The third commandment is, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."[\[1\]](#)

These commandments were the foundation for the moral behavior that the Hebrew people were to follow to keep their covenant relationship with God. Sometimes there is a particular confusion over the third commandment. A version of this covenant called "The Redneck Ten Commandments" lists the third commandment as "Watch yer mouth." While humorous, this fails to capture the essence of the commandment. Dropping a "g__d___," or an "OMG" in a conversation is not at the heart of the third commandment. Paul wrote of Jesus, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation."[\[2\]](#) This means that Jesus is God incarnate, which means exclaiming "Jesus Christ!" as an expression of disgust or surprise is the same as the expressions just mentioned. These phrases can violate taking God's name in vain, but are not at the heart of the issue. There are other passages in the Bible that address the use of impure, offensive, or vulgar language.

If vulgar and impious phrases such as GD or OMG are not at the heart of the third commandment, what is this commandment about? I suggest two meanings, both of which we see violated in American politics.

When God gave the Hebrews the Ten Commandments, the people were coming out of Egypt. The people were going into the land promised to them, which was inhabited by the Canaanites. Those people, as well as most people of the Ancient Near East, thought that by invoking a god's name, that god could be manipulated into doing what the people liked. Old Testament scholar Abel Ndjerareon tells us, "Pagans end up believing that they can easily manipulate both the name and the god represented by the name. The name thus becomes a way of controlling, of mastering, and taming the divinity. But the God of Israel refuses to allow his name to be used in this

way. He is not an object to be manipulated.”^{3} Unlike the gods of the surrounding nations, Yahweh will not be controlled or mastered by people simply because they invoke His name. Old Testament scholar John Walton also states, “The third commandment when read as ancient Near Eastern literature concerns how Yahweh’s power/authority was not to be perceived—people were to recognize it by refraining from attempts to control or misuse it.”^{4} In the third commandment Yahweh is telling the Hebrews, with whom He just entered a covenant, that He is not like pagan gods. They cannot manipulate Him by using His name.

Politicians do not use God’s name to manipulate God, they use God’s name to manipulate people. People will take God’s name and attach it to a political party or a politician to convince people to vote for them. Currently “Jesus Saves” is not only a statement of faith, now it is also a political banner. Jesus Saves banners were at the January 6th riots. Why? Were people witnessing to other people during the riot? That is not likely. Politicians use the name of God to gather support for campaigns and political ideas that God does not agree with. While they may not be trying to manipulate God, they are trying to manipulate His people.

There is another aspect to taking God’s name in vain. One use of the Hebrew word for “take” could be something like taking up arms, taking things into your own hands, or taking a bag from someone to help them carry groceries.

The word translated as “take” in the third commandment is also translated as “bear” in other parts of the Old Testament. In Exodus 28, God gives Moses the instructions for how to make the priestly garments and how these garments were to be used. One of the garments, like an apron, is called a breastpiece. The breastpiece has twelve stones attached to it. Each stone represents a tribe of Israel. Aaron is to wear this holy garment when entering the tabernacle: “So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on

his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to remembrance before the LORD. And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD." {5}

A few verses later Aaron is instructed to wear a headband with a gold plate with "Yahweh" engraved on it. The instructions are: "It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord." {6} In this passage we can see that Aaron is bearing, or representing, Israel before God by wearing the breastpiece. The gold plate on Aaron's forehead signifies that he is God's representative to Israel. In light of the third commandment and these instructions given to Aaron when fulfilling his priestly role, Israel is to represent God (bear or take his name) to the nations just as Aaron represents (bears) Israel before God. {7}

We Christians should be involved in politics. There is nothing wrong with Christians running for office, or campaigning for a cause. As Christians we bear God's name. We represent God to other people. This means that how we act, what we say, and how we treat people matters to God. When we take God's name and attach it to a political view that does not accurately represent Him, we bear His name in vain. When we campaign, we must do so in a way that honors God. We must not misrepresent Him.

American Politics and God

Throughout the history of America, people have appealed to God and the Bible to justify different social and political movements. The earliest people to settle in what became the United States were devout Christians. The Bible informed their

beliefs and way of life. The Founding Fathers had a variety of religious beliefs ranging from Enlightenment Epicureanism (an ancient Greek philosophy that believed that gods did not exist, and only physical things exist) and deism to Protestant Christianity. Most of them saw value in the Bible, even if they were not Christians. Different Americans at different times have appealed to God and the Bible to gain support for slavery, the abolition of slavery, Manifest Destiny (a cultural belief in the 19th-century United States that American settlers were destined to expand across North America, per *Wikipedia*), the humane treatment of Native Americans, Prohibition, and many other movements and goals. However, these movements are not equal when evaluated by the teachings of the Bible. Politicians and activists still appeal to the Bible to rally voters and supporters for their goals. How should current appeals to the Bible be evaluated?

Matthew Dowd, a Democrat who once worked as an advisor to the Bush administration, said, "If Jesus Christ was alive today, He would be called a groomer, He would be called woke, and He would be called a socialist if He was alive today and speaking the message He spoke in the gospels today about treating everybody with dignity." Dowd went on to say, "Jesus Christ hung around with prostitutes and tax collectors. He was nailed to a cross because He spoke on behalf of the most marginalized people in the Middle East."[\[8\]](#) He also said that a small segment of conservative activists has corrupted Jesus' message, which Dowd said was "love conquers hate."

What should we think about Dowd's statements during the interview? First, notice that Dowd does not quote the Bible at any time during the interview. He references the gospels in a general way. Given that this was a live interview on a news broadcast, I can understand that because time was limited.

The question remains, how do his claims stand up against biblical scrutiny? Would Jesus be called a groomer (slang for a person who builds relationships with children to

manipulate and exploit them)? I think Dowd means that Jesus would be falsely accused of being a groomer. But Dowd seems to think that Jesus would be teaching that same sex intercourse, transgenderism, and things like that are good. I see no evidence of that in the Bible.

Dowd's claim that Jesus died because He spoke out on behalf of marginalized people completely misses the mark. Jesus did disrupt the cultural norms and class divisions of the Jews of that time. Women traveled with Jesus and His disciples. Jesus spoke with the Samaritans. Jesus touched lepers and other unclean people. He even had a tax collector as one of his closest disciples. But there is no indication that He died because He did these things. Jesus did not die for "love conquers hate." The Apostle John tells us, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."[{9}](#) John also wrote, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not ours only but also the sins of the whole world."[{10}](#) While Jesus taught that the marginalized should be respected and that the oppressed should be defended, that is not why He died. Jesus did not die for love, He died because He loved the world. His death was not about equality, it was a payment for our sins. Those who confess their sins, oppressors and oppressed, and turn to Jesus as Lord of all creation, will have their sins forgiven.

The latest instance I saw of the Bible being used for politics is California governor Gavin Newsom's campaign billboards promoting the pro-choice position. The bottom of the billboards has Mark 12:31 at the bottom of the poster: "Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these." Newsom seems to think loving your neighbor means supporting abortion. He also left out the first part of Jesus' answer to the question of which command is the greatest, "The most important is, Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your

heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”[\[11\]](#) Does Newsom leave this out because he thinks it would make the billboard cluttered? I don’t think so. The question that Newsom needs to answer is, how does promoting the pro-choice position show love for God? Every person bears the image of God. When, in the development of the baby, is the image put in the baby? Because biology, and more importantly, the Bible does not tell us, it seems the most moral and cautious position is to assume that the image of God is in the baby at conception. Let us not forget that the command to love your neighbor is tied to the command to love God. How does abortion show love for God? Every politician or political activist who wants to use passages of the Bible to support their political cause needs to be able to answer these kinds of questions. Leaving these kinds of questions unanswered does not honor the name of God.

During President Trump’s campaign in 2016 he was a guest speaker at Liberty University. The thing most people remember about his speech is that he said “Two Corinthians” instead of “Second Corinthians.” But why should this matter? Christians in England call the book “Two Corinthians.”

The issue in Trump’s speech is the verse he quoted and what was implied by its use. Trump said, “I hear this is a major theme right here. ... Two Corinthians 3:17, that’s the whole ball game . . . ‘Where the spirit of the Lord is,’ right? ‘Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.’ . . . But we are going to protect Christianity.”[\[13\]](#) Trump referenced 2 Corinthians 3:17 by quoting part of it, then making the verse about his political campaign, implying that Christian freedom depended on electing him. But what is this verse really about? Here is the verse in context:

“But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one

turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”[{14}](#)

When viewed in context it is clear that 2 Corinthians is about Christ lifting the veil of sin, and the Spirit of the Lord providing freedom from sin. What does this have to do with Trump, or any other American politician? Nothing.

It is clear that American politicians have used the Bible to gain support from Christians. Most of the time politicians are taking passages out of context so that they can try to gain support from Christians to advance their own agenda. When politicians do this, they are bearing God’s name in vain. When we Christians remain silent, we are bearing God’s name in vain. In order to bear God’s name well we must speak what is true and call out what is false. This includes when people, Christian or otherwise, misrepresent God or the teachings of the Bible.

How Do We Do Politics

Staying out of politics is not a good option. God calls us to be good stewards of the gifts He gives us, one of which is the opportunity to be salt and light in our culture through government. Christians living under dictatorships do not enjoy this blessing. How should we Christians engage in politics then? Where in the Bible can we find guidance? How can we bear God’s name in a way that honors Him in politics? While there are a lot of places to find principles on specific issues, the beatitudes in Matthew 5 are a good place to find general principles for how to engage in politics and life. The beatitudes describe the characteristics that Christians should practice.

The first beatitude is, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”[{15}](#) When we are poor in Spirit, we realize that we “can do no good thing without

divine assistance.”[\[16\]](#) We must seek God’s will, not our will, in politics. We are not to be about our political vision, but about the business of God’s kingdom. We must humble ourselves before God and make His priorities our priorities.

The second beatitude is, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” When our political opponents face personal crises, we should not celebrate. We do not honor God by hating our political opponents and finding joy in their misfortunes. We should not celebrate the suffering of the liberals, or the conservatives (whichever one you find more annoying). We should still act in love and mourn with them when they suffer personal loss and misfortune. We should pray for them. We should not cover up the failings of our political allies. We should mourn their failures and encourage them to hold themselves to a higher standard.

The third beatitude is, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” As followers of Christ, we know that we depend on God for what we have. We should not be proud of gaining and wielding political power. Followers of Christ inherit the earth because they are meek (biblical meekness is strength under the control of love), not because they wield political power.

The fourth beatitude is, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” We should not engage in corrupt politics, or tolerate those who do. This means calling out corruption in both parties. We cannot ignore political corruption because it is our guy, or we might lose the next election. We must represent God with integrity.

The fifth beatitude is, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Jesus was not ruthless. God mercifully offers us forgiveness even though we do not deserve it. How can we refuse to show the same mercy to our political rivals?

The sixth beatitude is, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." We are representatives of God, his priests. We must be pure, no matter how much it costs or inconveniences us. We serve God, not the world. We oppose tyranny wherever we find it.

The seventh beatitude is, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." We should be known by our love, not by our feuds. We should forgive and make peace with our political rivals as much as we can. We should not hold grudges or try to punish our political opponents when we have the power to do so.

The eighth beatitude is, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We know that by holding to pure standards and representing God well we will be persecuted. We will be called Bible thumpers, Kool-Aid drinkers, backwards, deniers, and all kinds of other things. When this happens, we take the persecution and look to God, who will bring us into His kingdom.

The ninth beatitude is, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." When others mock us because we are loyal to Christ, we remain loyal to Christ.

As Christians we bear God's image in every aspect of our lives. We must bear the image of God well in politics as well. This means that we have to treat others as we want them to treat us, pursue mercy, pursue truth, and pursue peace as best we can. We have to do this because we are bearing God's image. We are representing Him in everything we do. May God grant us the courage and integrity to represent Him well.

Notes

1. Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11
2. Colossians 1:15
3. Abel Ndjerareon, *Exodus. In Africa Bible Commentary, ed.*

- Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), p. 111.
4. Walton, John, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament 2nd ed* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2018), p. 121.
 5. Exodus 28:29-30 ESV
 6. Exodus 28:38 ESV
 7. Imes, Carmen Joy, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sin Still Matters* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), pp. 48-52.
 8. "MSNBC analyst claims Jesus would be called a 'groomer,' 'woke,' and 'socialist' if 'He was alive today' – TheBlaze," www.foxnews.com/media/msnbc-analyst-matthew-dowd-jesus-christ-groomer-alive-today. Accessed 11/12/2022.
 9. John 3:16
 10. 1 John 2:2
 11. Romans 3:23
 12. Mark 12:29, 30 ESV
 13. "Trump Saying 'Two Corinthians' Doesn't Matter; His Heresy Does | Opinion News," www.christianpost.com/news/trump-two-corinthians-heresy-liberty.html. Accessed 11/12/2022.
 14. 2 Corinthians 3:14-17 ESV
 15. The Beatitudes are in Matthew 5:3-12
 16. Tasker, R. V. G. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), p. 61.

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Bad Blood Reconciled: A

Review of Taylor Swift's "Bad Blood"

Probe intern Sarah Withers contrasts Taylor Swift's Bad Blood song to the deep spiritual truths of the gospel of Christ.

Naomi, a young Taylor Swift fan fighting leukemia, adopted Swift's song "[Bad Blood](#)" as her theme song during her battle with cancer. In response to her [video](#) Naomi uploaded on YouTube, Taylor Swift contributed [\\$50,000 to Naomi's medical bills](#). Naomi through her heartwarming story was able to transform the song to make it inspiring and hopeful. However, as most know, the song is not about fighting terrible cancer but instead about a broken relationship. Although Swift did not disclose the antagonist, she no longer sees reconciliation as an option. By contrasting Swift's "Bad Blood" with Christ's reconciling blood, Christians are reminded of the transformative power of the gospel to bring healing and hope to broken relationships.

Destructive Power of Bad Blood

"Bad Blood," through the lyrics and video, paints a picture of the pain that is felt after someone is wronged in a relationship. The antagonist attacking her and "rubbing it in so deep" left Swift with a "a really deep cut." Many, if not all of us, have felt the pangs of being cut deeply with words and actions in a relationship gone wrong. A quick read through the Psalms reveals victims of broken relationships crying out in pain. The Psalmist laments, "Even my closest friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel before me."[\[1\]](#)

Not only do broken relationships hurt initially and deeply, but often the pain lingers. Swift captures this experience through the lyrics, "Still got scars in my back from your knives, so don't think it's in the past, these kinds of wounds

they last and they last.” Again the Psalmist writes, “I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked.”^{2} One thing both the Psalms and Swift can agree on is that broken relationships and betrayal are deeply painful.

For Swift, not only is the relationship broken and painful, it is irreconcilable. She notes the hopelessness of the relationship, “I don’t think we can solve them (problems)” and “in time can heal but this won’t.” This is the most upsetting part of the song.

We all have had broken relationships, yet the ones that hurt the most are the ones that turn from feelings of hurt to feelings of hate. We should hate sin and the pain it brings with it, but we are called to love even our enemies. Ephesians 6 says that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the “spiritual forces of evil.”^{3} As difficult as it may be, we should guard our heart from future pain without hating the individual who hurt us. Thus, reconciliation should always be the ideal goal and in cases where reconciliation cannot or does not occur, forgiveness should still reign in our heart.

Healing Power of Christ’s Blood

It seems like an impossible request to forgive someone and even move towards reconciliation with someone who betrayed and hurt us. This would be an unimaginable task if it were not for someone who did this for us first. The gospel is the perfect example of reconciliation.

When we sin, whether or not it affects anyone, we sin against God. Our most fundamental problem with sin is not that it hurts other people, but that it separates us from the love of God. Those who do not accept Christ as their savior are outside of the effect of Christ’s atoning blood and therefore are not able to experience God’s love. However, Paul in

Ephesians says "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."[{4}](#)

Before we can offer true love and reconciliation to others, we must first receive love and be reconciled to God. The only way to turn our bad blood against God into unity with God is through the power of Christ's redeeming blood on the cross. Colossians states, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."[{5}](#) His blood cleanses us so that we are filled with the selfless love towards others that the Scriptures ask of us.[{6}](#)

Our Fight against Bad Blood

Even for Christians who have been shown love and forgiveness, we still do not always experience an overflowing of love and forgiveness for those who wrong us. We still struggle with having bad blood towards our enemies. We still feel the pain of the broken relationships even though we are in Christ. As Christians, we look forward to a day when we will not feel pain, but while we still live in a fallen world, pain and hurt are very much part of our everyday lives.

However, the wrong that causes our pain has been or will be paid for. As Christians, if we are wronged by a believer in Christ, remember that Jesus died for those sins as well as for ours.[{7}](#) Yes, we should still lament that even believers sin and cause pain, yet justice was important enough to Christ that He died for those sins.[{8}](#) For those who sin against us and remain outside of Christ, their wrongs will be righted at the cost of their own life in eternal wrath. The hope of sharing the gospel is to offer others the redemptive power of Christ which indeed makes the gospel good news!

Looking back to the Psalms, there is a life-giving trend even within the darkness and pain. Even in Psalm 88, which is

considered to be one of the darkest Psalms, the psalmist still cries out to God. In our broken relationships with others, true reconciliation must start and end with the grace and justice of God.

God knew we had bad blood and provided a Savior to change our hearts. He still continues to hear our cries of pain and sent the Holy Spirit to continue to protect our hearts from holding on to the bad blood in our relationships.

Notes

1. Psalm 41:9 All verses are from the English Standard Version.
2. Psalm 55:2-3, see also Psalm 69.
3. Ephesians 6:12
4. Ephesians 2:13
5. Colossians 1:19-20
6. Hebrews 9:14
7. Ephesians 1:7
8. This is why I think St. Anselm was on the right track in *Cur Deus Homo*, when he argued that Jesus Christ had to become incarnate and die for our sins so that God's justice and grace could be made manifest. If God just ignored our sins, justice would not prevail—thank God He is both just and gracious through Jesus Christ!

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How and Why We Should

Biblically Analyze Songs

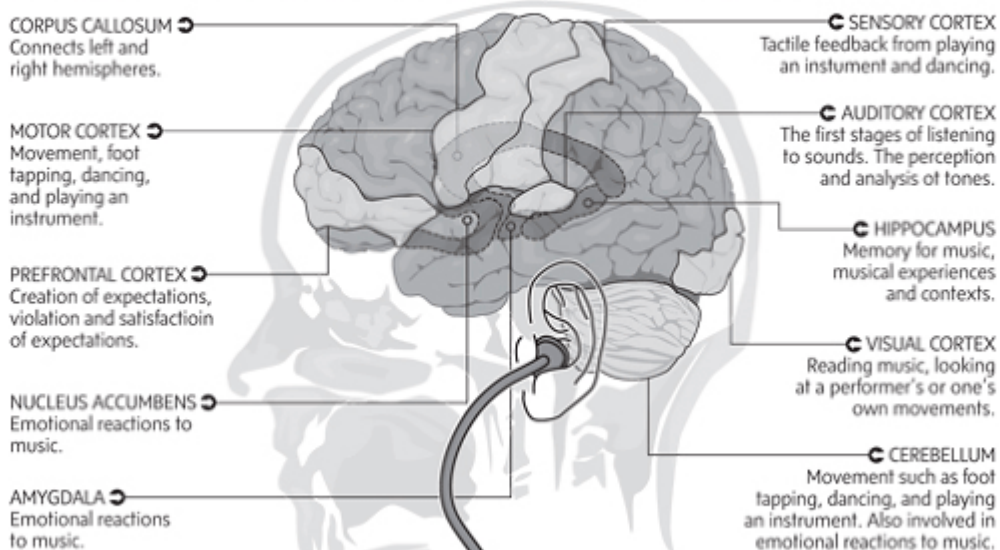
Probe intern Sarah Withers provides insight about thinking biblically about popular songs.

Numerous scientific studies have revealed that music is linked to relieving pain/stress, releasing endorphins, aiding coordination, increasing concentration, expanding memory, improving language skills, and lowering blood pressure, just to list a few.[\[1\]](#) Unfortunately, not all genres of music offer these benefits, so it would be quite misleading to say that critically analyzing songs can act as a remedy for migraines—however convenient and persuasive that claim might be!

While I may not be able to claim health advantages, powerful benefits can be gleaned for us and others by being aware and graciously critical of songs. I hope that I can provide how and why we should biblically analyze songs and challenge you to be a more thoughtful and gracious critical consumer of all types of music.

Music on the mind

When we listen to music, it's processed in many different areas of our brain. The extent of the brain's involvement was scarcely imagined until the early nineties, when functional brain imaging became possible. The major computational centres include:



MIKE FAHLE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ SOURCE: THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON MUSIC: THE SCIENCE OF A HUMAN OBSESSION

How Do We Biblically Analyze a Song?

The most obvious first step to biblically analyzing a song is to actively listen to the lyrics and sometimes even watch the music video. It helps me focus and understand if I pull up the lyrics and read along as I listen. While I listen, I think about how the song makes me feel, what the song got right or wrong in its worldview, what I appreciate about the song, and any questions about possible meanings and interpretations. I also think about if or how I can relate to the song's message. Have I ever experienced, desired, or seen something similar to the song's message? If the answer is no, then maybe I could think about how seeing the songwriter's perspective could help me relate and communicate with someone with very different desires and experiences than my own.

Ultimately we biblically critique a song by shining the light of the biblical truths on it. No secular song gets everything right for the obvious reason that the gospel is not present. For some songs all that is missing is an explicit reference to the gospel, while other songs directly conflict with the gospel. Yet, for even the more difficult songs, Christians can understand the song's message for the glory of God.

For example, Lana Del Rey's song "Born to Die"[{2}](#) provides the message that we should enjoy life because when we die there is nothing left for us. For those in Christ, that song is radically wrong about our purpose and destiny.

However, for those who are outside of Christ, that song paints a rather apt picture of their bleak destiny.[{3}](#) So yes, the song is very dark and upsetting, yet when I hear that song I can mourn for those outside of Christ and praise God that the lyrics of that song are not true for me. In that way, that song can incite worship and foster resolve to reach out to unbelievers-something Del Rey probably would never consider possible! That is the transformative power of the gospel, the

greatest good news.

However, there are songs that Christians should avoid. Songs that are overly sexualized or demonic in nature may be too difficult to redeem.^{4} Also some people are more affected by music than others. If you are not able to redeem the song by countering it with life-giving truths from Scripture and the song continues to bring you down, then you should not listen to it. Christians should pray for wisdom and guidance to know when to listen and engage and when to turn it off.^{5}

Why Should We Care?

Since music is so integrated into our daily lives, many of us are consumers of music whether we are intentional about it or not. [The American Academy of Pediatrics in 1996](#) (AAP) found that 14- to 16-year-olds listened to an average of 40 hours of music per week. For a more conservative number, [RAIN \(Radio and Internet Newsletter\)](#) reported that students “spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes a day consuming media, 2 hours 19 minutes of which is spent listening to music.”^{6}

While these studies focus on teens and adolescents, it is fair to say that adults also listen to a fair amount of music, whether it is through headphones at work or the radio in the car. When it comes down to it, music is very much part of our everyday life. For some it can be avoided, but by most, it is accepted and greatly enjoyed.

Musical lyrics are also sticky. It never ceases to amaze me how I can still easily sing along to songs from my childhood the second the second it plays. Yet, when discussing my project of biblically analyzing popular music, a common response is that people often do not listen to the lyrics, but rather just enjoy the melody and beat. The AAP (1996) reported that “in one study 30% of teenagers knew the lyrics to their favorite songs,” which would seem to affirm that initial claim.

With those intuitions and findings, it would be easy to undermine this project as interesting but unimportant. However, the same AAP (2009) article cited the Knobloch-Westerwick *et al.* study that “although young listeners might not understand all the details in lyrics, they recognize enough to obtain a general idea of the message they bring.”

Moreover, the fact that we do remember song lyrics well after we have stopped listening to them shows that we are aware of the words even if we are not actively thinking about the message. In many respects we have become passive consumers of information and entertainment, especially when it comes to music. It is in light of this passivity that we should strive to be active listeners.

Every song with words carries a message, although some are more obvious and dangerous than others. For example, current artists such as Macklemore, Hozier, Lana Del Rey, and Lady Gaga proclaim more explicit messages and agendas in their songs-something as Christians we should be aware of and ready to critique. The AAP (1996) claimed that “awareness of, and sensitivity to, the potential impact of music lyrics by consumers, the media, and the music industry is crucial.”

Although the rate and impact of the consumption of songs can be debated, there are still benefits of being aware of and engaging with our culture through songs.

What Are the Benefits?

Well, there are three main benefits to biblically analyzing songs. First, we refine our ability to enjoy music. For many this will be very counterintuitive. People I have talked with have feared that if they are too critical of the music’s message, then they will no longer be able to enjoy it. I will agree, there are some songs that might be ruined by listening critically to the lyrics. However, Christians should likely avoid listening to those songs anyway.

Even with songs we don't like, we can still enjoy them for their musicality and benefit from some insights, however hard to find. The vast majority of songs are redeemable even though they may counter the gospel. Where God provides the songwriter with common grace insights, there is an opportunity to redeem the song. Remember Lana Del Rey's song; I am still able to enjoy her powerful use of a darker sound and message, but I am also reminded of the hope I have in the gospel.

If we get to a point where we become cynical and antagonistic towards our music culture, we should remember that God gave us music and culture as a gift. The Psalms are examples of a great variety of songs that were written to offer the expression of truth about God, humanity, and our world. The obvious difference is that the Psalms are God-breathed and inspired—yet there are often truths that can be gleaned even from secular and popular songs. After all, we are all made in God's image and bear His music-loving traits.

Another benefit of analyzing songs is the ability to learn about our culture and the people influenced by it. Regardless of whether the lyrics are true, they are believed to be true by the songwriter and often by people in our culture. Part of the appeal of songs is that they are relatable. Relatability makes the song powerful and influential.

We can gain invaluable insight into the thoughts of our culture and younger generations through the lyrics of songs. Many songs provide commentary on our culture's view of alcohol consumption, drug use, violence, relationships, sexuality, freedom, and self-worth. By learning what the songs say about such topics, we can be better equipped to understand where people are coming from.

The final benefit which naturally flows from the previous one is being able to relate and engage with our culture. By engaging with themes in songs, we are ultimately practicing how to engage with people. I was talking with a group of high

school students about one of Macklemore's songs called "Starting Over" which is about his relapse as an alcoholic. The song is marked with shame, a deep sense of failure, and loss of identity. Before listening to the song, I encouraged them to listen to the lyrics as if a person was talking with them. With that perspective, students would be less likely to immediately judge him as a failure, and instead would be more likely to empathize and relate as we are all failures and slaves to sin outside of Christ.

By being aware of songs, we can better engage the lies of our culture and counter them with the truths of Scripture.^{7} The AAP (1996 & 2009), encourages parents to "become media-literate" which means "watching television with their children and teenagers, discussing the content with them, and initiating the process of selective viewing at an early age." Later in the article, the authors even suggest that parents should look up the lyrics and become familiar with them. Even if you are not a parent, as Christians one way we can help correct lies of our culture is through conversations about popular music.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." It is our hope and joy that we have been redeemed and my prayer that Christians will show others the light of Christ.

So, the goal of analyzing songs from a Christian perspective is not merely an academic exercise that challenges critical thought, but to move us to action. Peter claimed that Christians were saved so "that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."^{8} Ultimately we should be encouraged to talk, relate, empathize, and love others. Through songs we can help others to "See to it that no one takes you captive by

philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”[\[9\]](#)

Notes

1. Another article that was particularly helpful was from the [eMedExpert](#). However, if you just search “benefits to music” (or the like) and you will be overwhelmed by how many articles develop all the unique benefits to music.
2. The video includes sexual content, brief drug use, and a violent image at the end.
3. I should note however, that the song seems to hold the message of mere extinction at death. As Christians, we believe that souls are immortal which means even the non-believer persists. For those outside of Christ, they will experience death as eternal wrath and destruction. See John 3:36, Roman 6:23, Matthew 25:46, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, and Revelation 21:8.
4. To address briefly the pushback on the idea that we can or should “redeem culture”: The confusion rests in the nuanced difference in meaning of the word “redeemed.” I use the word “redeemed” in this context to mean something closer to transformed by truth, not redeemed in the sense God has redeemed believers. Yes, Scriptures never call us to “redeem culture” but God does call us to let the light of truth shine. By engaging culture with the truth of Scriptures, Christians can make aspects of culture honoring to God, thus in that sense redeeming them. For example, pornography falls under the category of “unredeemable,” meaning that there is no way someone could make pornography honoring to God. However, with different aspects of culture this task is possible and I think should be encouraged.
5. See Hebrews 5:14.
6. RAIN cited [The Kaiser Family Foundation study](#) for these statistics. The report also broke down how the kids and teens were listening to the music, finding that on average per day they listen to 41 minutes of music on their iPod and similar

devices, 32 minutes of music on computers (iTunes and Internet radio), and 32 minutes listening to the radio.

7. See Ephesians 6:17-20 and 2 Corinthians 10:1-6.

8. 1 Peter 2:9.

9. Colossians 2:8

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Don't Take Me to Church Without the Gospel: A Review of Hozier's "Take Me to Church"

What started as a music [video](#) on YouTube as a statement against the abuse of the homosexual community peaked as the second most popular song according to Billboard Top 100 in early 2015. With its powerful music and damning words towards the Church, I was compelled to research and find the meaning and implications of Hozier's song "Take Me to Church." In the song, Hozier captures the sacrifice of religion without the truth and hope of the gospel.

The chorus, especially, paints a rather bleak picture of the seemingly pointless sacrifice of religion. In it Hozier writes,

"I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies
I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife
Offer me that deathless death
Good god, let me give you my life."

Through the song, Hozier rightly grasps the element of

sacrifice required of faith. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include parallel passages that call Christians to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus.

Christians' Meaningful Sacrifice

Sam Allberry, author of [*Is God Anti-Gay?*](#) and associate pastor at St Mary's Church in Maidenhead, UK, spoke at Covenant College recently about Christianity and homosexuality as someone who struggles with same-sex attraction himself. He expounded upon this idea of the sacrifice of Christians when he told the story of someone with a same-sex partner who asked him, "What could possibly be worth leaving my partner for?"

This question of sacrifice is essential for everyone faced with the gospel to ask. There is a cost; you will have to deny yourself, whether it's the issue of same-sex sexual practices, alcohol abuse, pride, or even just laziness.

If the message of the Bible stopped there, we would be left with the hopeless and purposeless sacrifice that the song portrays. However, the Bible does not start or end with our sacrifice. Romans 5 points Christians to Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us by proclaiming that ". . . God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Those who trust in Christ will never have to pay the price of our own sins because Christ did it once and for all on the cross while we were still in sin. We can entrust Him with our lives because He first gave His perfect life for us. Even though we are steeped in sin as Hozier points out through the lyrics "We were sick but I love it," Christ does not leave us in our sickness. In fact, He heals us, showing us hope in something much greater than our sins.

Allberry concluded that the answer to the question presented to him had to be: the gospel—only the gospel is worth leaving everything for. The gospel is truly *the* good news for everyone, because through His sacrifice the lyric rings true,

“only then I am clean.”

So our sacrifice is meaningful in Christ not because our sacrificing saves us but because it is a response of the saving grace Christians have already received. Christians can give up our old way of life because Christ has given us new life. In Ephesians 4, we are called to this painful process of “putting off our old self which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

How Should We Respond?

It is legitimate to wonder what we as Christians should do with songs and a culture that seem to attack or misrepresent the Church. I do not think we should respond to such songs by posting combative comments online or by changing the radio station every time the song plays. Rather, we should appreciate the song for its musicality and learn from its lyrics. I see two main takeaways:

First, I think we should reflect on what songs say about our culture’s view of the Church and how we as the Church can respond to this marred image. In an [interview](#) by Gigwise, Hozier says that “It hasn’t been a good year for the Church-it hasn’t been a good hundred years for the Church.” In some ways, I agree with Hozier that, especially on the topic of homosexuality, we have not loved those outside and inside the Church well. I mourn for those abused by the Church for their sexual sin as the song and music video illustrate. Sometimes the Church has fallen short of showing truth in love as commanded by Scripture. Instead the Church often fails to speak truth by accepting the sin of homosexuality or lovelessly alienating, and trying to legalistically “fix” the sin.

Second, the core of our religion as Christians must remain the gospel; without it the lyric would ring true: “Every Sunday’s getting more bleak, a fresh poison each week.” In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that as Christians, “We are of all people the most to be pitied” if the gospel—the message of Christ’s death and resurrection that reconciles us to God—is not true. I would challenge you, as I have been challenged, to continually ask yourself, “How does the gospel apply?” Wherever the gospel is missing so is truth, hope, and joy.

While I struggle with messages of hopelessness, I marvel in the promise that the gospel is true and there is hope for us who rest in the salvation of Christ both in this life and the next. I look forward to Heaven with my Lord and Savior, and yes, it is something worth leaving everything for.

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Crimping Consciences: Texas City Railroads Pro-Gay Ordinance

Byron Barlowe blogs about the his city’s Anti-Discrimination ordinance intended to give full recognition to the LGBT community at the expense of those who disagree.

New Anti-Discrimination Policy Approved

According to the [Dallas Morning News Plano Blog](#), “In a split vote Monday, the Plano City Council passed the controversial Equal Rights Policy [ERP] over the objections of many residents in the standing-room-only crowd.

The amendment to the city's 1989 anti-discrimination policy extends protections from housing, employment and public accommodation discrimination to include sexual orientation, gender identity and other categories" like veterans. While no one objected to the inclusion of veterans, an overwhelming number of surprised and very lately aware (as in, the day of) citizens voiced strong opposition. These objections, while noted, seemed to make little to no difference to the city council and certainly to Mayor Harry LaRosiliere, who was so eager to vote for the statute that he went out of order during proceedings.

As a Plano resident who publicly urged the council to vote "No" on the measure, I offer some reflections on the issue—both local and larger—from a biblically informed worldview.

Good Intentions: Trying to Legislate Values *Directly*

Rather than seeking to legislate merely out of a set of values—an unavoidable reality—the Plano City Council clearly tried to impose a set of values directly onto the public by adopting this more expansive anti-discrimination ordinance. Such legislative overreach has become part and parcel of an increasingly politically correct polity known as the United States of America. Plano is now more PC. While this kind of ordinance is not only inadvisable because it cannot hope to work well, it also steps beyond the scope of a proper role of government.

IT CANNOT WORK BECAUSE . . .

We often hear the phrase "You can't legislate morality." Well, yes and no. While the very nature of human law at its root is a delineation of and codification of right vis a vis wrong—that is, strictures or incentives administered by the state as a morally informed code of conduct—it is also true

that government cannot successfully impose morality, per se, onto the consciences of their citizens.

Yet, that is precisely what such ordinances as Plano's ERP seeks to do. Plano's "out" regarding the problem of conscientious objection? City Attorney Paige Mims assures us that if anyone outside of the many exempted statuses has a moral or religious objection, they can go through a waiver process. This is, on its face, an undue imposition on businesspeople who don't fall under exempted categories like education, non-profit or religious. Recent legal precedent (see Hobby Lobby case) makes clear that religious businesses do not somehow lay down their rights of conscience when they go into business.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT. . .

When government entities try to arbitrate motives, for example hate crimes laws that purport to regulate actions based on the attitudinal intent of the actor, it steps into a sphere where it does not, indeed it cannot, belong. In other words, it takes on a godlike sovereignty to righteously discern between this and that intention. Can't be done. Not righteously. Not fairly.

People—including city legal departments and judges—are fallible humans who lack the innate ability to administer justice based primarily or solely on someone's internal motivation. "The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out" (Proverbs 20:5). Drawing out the "purposes" of a man's or woman's heart is certainly not a governmental role. But this is what it takes to know motives, a role only God claims full access to, and a role traditionally reserved for clergy, other spiritual advisers and psychologists.

Here is a pithy bunch of [biblical worldview teaching on the role of government](#).

Biblically, the proper role of government is founded in limits primarily written in Romans 13. As I understand it, a biblical worldview on government's role is limited to: fighting wars, passing and enforcing laws concerning public human interactions and that's about it. Anything else falls under the jurisdiction of religious and social institutions. Government: stay out!

I'm not arguing for such a state of affairs as an absolute in the real world, but as a plumb line to measure when government has stepped over its proper boundaries. In the case of Plano's ERP government has overstepped.

Progressivism on Parade

The subtext of public deliberations on Plano's ERP was plainly a progressive agenda. Why else would a city seek to get "ahead of the curve" on a social issue such as gender bias or sexual identity discrimination or whatever the euphemism is today? (Refer above to the value of limited role of government, which was expressed repeatedly to the council by citizens of Plano.) The council, challenged that there are no known cases of such discrimination, seemed to shrug dismissively and invoke the need to "get ahead of" the issue.

"The issue of equality is a basic human rights issue and the choice for some to focus on a person's sexuality is conflating the issue," said the Mayor. Conflating what with what? Either the mayor misunderstands the term "conflating" (making things the same) or he's basically accusing objectors of the very thing that has been foisted upon them—namely, making one's sexual choices (not their true sexuality) the determiner of human rights. This is like watching someone start a fight over a piece of land and then accusing the one attacked of starting that same fight over that very piece of land!

Questioning the need for the statute was otherwise met with a not-so-veiled sense of accusation, an implication of inherent

bias on the part of the objectors, despite an overall congenial atmosphere. So, if I question the veracity of the claim to need such a policy or ask for reasonable cause, I am automatically anti-gay? That's patently false and unfair. Yet that was the sense of things in a politically correct undercurrent that is the zeitgeist of our day.

Worldview War

This is the serious game begun back in the 1970s by Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen who spelled out the propaganda project of the gay lobby in a book titled [*After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear & Hatred of Gays in the 90s*](#). Now that their jamming (name-calling, guilt by association and other tactics) have worked so well, only an implicit inference need be made at such meetings as Monday night's. It has a chilling—no—a virtual shutdown effect.

Yet, many citizens displayed aplomb when speaking on the Constitution and related matters. Businesspeople appealed to the unfairness of having to seek redress through a voucher system. One person well said in response: "The Constitution is my waiver." First Amendment (or any other) rights do not require special permission. It's government's role merely to ensure them, which Plano may think it's doing by elevating ever more special interests to protected status. That is an upside-down approach that's illegitimate no matter how much case law exists or how many other cities and companies enact similar policies.

The "We're Just Following" Fallacy

An admittedly very arguable point I'd like to add: Mayor LaRosiliere and City Attorney Mims claimed that other major cities in Texas have such statutes on the books. Hence we are not, as implicated, "out front" taking legal risks, but rather are following others' lead. This seems disingenuous.

Are we “out in front” of the issue or are we, as strongly emphasized by the Mayor, simply one in a fairly long line of municipalities trying to codify fair treatment to people of all lifestyles and segments? One could make the case that Plano is in the vanguard overall but not first in implementation. However, that is unsatisfactory to many. You can’t ultimately have it both ways: either you’re progressive on social issues (which does not truly reflect Plano well) or you’re just falling in line with current legal trends.

The “Gay Gene” at the Bottom of the Debate

One thing is sure: *increased expansion of rights and privileges to previously unaddressed parties is the trend in our culture—and lots of it has to do with sexuality in a newly politicized way.* But we thought government was supposed to get out of our bedrooms?

Any claim to that distinction has been lost with the adoption of the near-universal belief in what amounts to a “[gay gene](#)”—that a person inherently possesses a sexual identity that may indeed be homosexual or of other varieties. This, over and against a mere proclivity or attraction to the same sex, which leaves room for choice, which is an ethical issue. Remove choice regarding homosexuality, you remove any basis of objection. Remove objection, you can run roughshod over any cultural restraints on the free and damaging expression of sexuality outside the bounds of its Inventor, God. Remove those restrictions, celebrate the lifestyle, then codify and impugn those who disagree, and the After the Ball agenda is a complete success.

Monday night’s meeting was an incremental victory toward this end, whether or not players on the city council or either side of the issue realized it. Regarding objectors’ motives, it’s one thing to care for individuals whose sexual identity is in

question or those who act out a gay lifestyle and it's another kind of thing entirely to exercise one's rights to oppose codification of these choices and lifestyles. I and many of my friends there that night were doing one while we practice the other in private situations, too.

There is no cognitive dissonance or hypocrisy here—one can do both public square advocacy of conservative values and also outreach to individuals who struggle in a certain area of sin—namely other-than-heterosexual-wed sex. True Christlike love does not affirm that which the Bible condemns, but shows grace nonetheless.

There is a Precedent for Unintended Consequences and Abuse

Plano's ERP sets up the same oppression of religious objectors that has been seen already across the U.S. with cake bakers, wedding venue owners and others who—for reasons of conscience—refuse to do business with certain parties in select situations like gays getting married. Yes, exemptions were written into Plano's ordinance, but does anyone seriously believe these will stand up under judicial scrutiny in this day and age? The erosion of rights continues—and saying so, again, is not to be confused with [intolerance](#).

This brand of identity politics is rooted in the cultural adoption of the doctrine of a gay gene ("God or nature made me this way!"), which is at a worldview level, where most objectors to the statute were coming from. We object to the underlying presupposition that homosexuality is not utterly tied up with choice, which is so fundamental to opposition to the gay rights issue. (I almost come off as a throwback rube for even bringing it up in today's enlightened culture—which furthers my point!)

The Condescension that Falsely Pits Feelings vs. Facts

Monday night's proceedings—at least from the point of view of the city council—were saturated with what has been called the Sacred / Secular Split. On this view, there are basically two levels of discourse: an area of public life informed largely by science but also by enlightened social values (invariably liberal / progressive / non-traditional ones) balanced unevenly by a lesser valued, private world of emotional / psychological / religious sentiments.

The former—where real knowledge resides—should supposedly be the domain of public policy. The latter—again, a private set of often closely held feelings and values that should have no sway in the public arena yet the existence of which are somewhat guarded by government and other institutions—are to be tolerated as inevitable but will hopefully catch up with social contracts like those being forged by the gay lobby and societal institutions across the waterfront. The notion is: “You have a right to your private opinion. Just don't bring it into the public square.”

This attitude, this taken-for-granted starting place was most evident in closing remarks made by several city council members—all of whom happened to vote for the policy. One council member waxed eloquent on his world travels, noting that the most advanced societies he'd run across made it a point never to discriminate. (I don't know where he's been, but perhaps his hotel's staff might beg to differ—just guessing.)

More poignantly, he and another council member who said that her Christian faith informed her “yes” vote, was only one more who joined a chorus of comments like:

“There were lots of strong feelings on the topic of discussion tonight” and

“This is a very emotional issue for many. . . .”

The plain inference was that objections were raised out of the private, sacred area of life, laden with “emotion” and “feelings” while effective debate occurred on the level of law, fact and agreed-upon societal norms (at least the evolving kind that our “City of Excellence” wants to be known for).

Pronouncements by a clergy woman (Disciples of Christ) who serves as an officer of a Plano Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender association, the mayor and at least one more gay advocate that the passage of the ERP was just “the right thing to do” obviously paints the vast majority of citizens as those who want to do the wrong thing. According to Mayor LaRosiliere, “Providing equal rights to everyone is the right thing to do.” Rights to what? Rights in displacement of whose rights? The task in a pluralistic society is to find that fairest middle ground—and that failed Monday night.

Apparently bigotry, at least ignorance, was the only thing standing in the way of Plano’s ERP. Thank you for the condescension. Which leads to my final point: the race card was deftly played by none other than Mayor LaRosiliere where it has no place. And the Mayor did precisely what he accused others of of doing, that is . . .

. . . Conflating Race & Sexual Lifestyle

Plano’s Mayor ended deliberations (or nearly did) with [a speech](#) on the equivalency of historical human rights movements to the current push for special privileges for sexual identities and lifestyles. His well-written story arc was centered on the question, “Why are we doing this now?” In a series of juxtaposed historical references, he posed the question he deemed was being needlessly asked about Plano’s Equal Rights Protection ordinance: **Why pass this now if there is no case on record of any discrimination?** In the case of the

infamous Dredd-Scott Supreme Court decision that ruled blacks were 3/5 of a person one might ask, he said, "Why are we doing this now?"

"If we spoke in 1919," LaRosiliere continued, "to allow women to vote, the question would be, 'Why are you oppressing me and making me subject to this now.'" He went on to paint discrimination against the Irish in early 19th Century New York and segregation in the South in the 20th Century as morally equivalent instances comparable to the current situation—ostensibly oppression of gay, lesbian and transgender citizens.

Very cleverly devised rhetorical device, that. But it **presupposes a moral equivalency that a black man sitting beside me rejected outright.** This gentlemen from Nigeria was so confused by the proceedings and the Mayor's speech capping them off that he was convinced the entire issue at hand was racism! When I asked him this question, he unequivocally answered "No!": "Do you think that homosexual identity is the same kind of thing as you being black or being from Nigeria?"

"No!"

And rightly, **my new African friend—who is a Christian—was bothered by the conflation of the two and the use of such rhetoric to elevate a class of people based on their sinful behavior and identity to it as the basis to extend so-called human rights. We all have the right to fair treatment as humans made in God's image. We do not have a right to socially engineer law to force the compromise of conscience that is being carried out by Plano's new ordinance.**

As I pleaded with the council not to allow, we will surely read about this case going to court, being found unconstitutional and otherwise unlawful and costing this taxpayer and all others unnecessarily.

Ideas, worldviews, do indeed have consequences.