

Who Are You, Really?

Series: Beyond the Ballot

Date: October 18, 2026

Primary Scripture: Colossians 2:12; 3:1–4

Additional Passages: 1 Peter 2:9–12; Galatians 2:20

Key Principle: *When politics becomes primary, identity becomes fragile.*

Good morning, Menlo Church, and thanks so much for joining us this weekend. A shout-out to those of you joining us from one of our Bay Area campuses in San Mateo, Menlo Park, Mountain View, and Saratoga. Your presence is a gift this morning, and I believe God uniquely meets us in places like this.

There are a couple of things we are navigating today. As you've already heard, today is Baptism Sunday, and people throughout Menlo Church have decided to go public with their faith in Jesus; you'll get a chance to see that later in our services.

One of the unique things about Menlo is that if you walked in today and weren't planning to get baptized, but you feel nudged by God to go public with your faith in Jesus, there will be a time, a place, and a person you can connect with to make that decision today!

We work to remove any barriers that might get in your way, including a change of clothes and a place to get ready. If you have felt God calling you to take your faith public, the best day to do it was yesterday, but the next best day is today, and we'd love to celebrate with you.

Second, we're starting a new series called Beyond the Ballot as we approach the election, and my upfront disclaimer is that we are NOT telling you how to vote. We regularly talk about topics that impact our culture and lives, from politics to technology, through the lens of faith in Jesus.

There is no way we can cover everything on a subject like this, and we've actually already done a series focusing on some other aspects of political engagement that is worth your time, and you can find it at menlo.church/connect.

Here's how we'll talk about this: 1. We view our politics through the lens of our faith, not the other way around. 2. In a world where politics has become the new religion, that order matters more than ever. 3. People who love Jesus land on both sides of almost every vote on the ballot.

Three main groups of people are listening today: those convinced that Jesus is politically progressive and that any faithful Christian should assume that party platform. Then, a group that holds to a more politically conservative stance and regularly regulates their views in public.

And a third group of people who feel relatively politically homeless; you're exhausted by both camps, and it's easy to slip into an overly cynical view where none of this matters and nothing we do can ever change it. This series aims to help all three groups.

So, with that as the goal, we can probably all agree, Christian or not, that we should start with prayer, and if you're a follower of Jesus, the great news is your King, the King of kings, is not on the ballot and His Kingdom is not up for debate, so let's ask for His help in this conversation.

So if I'm to believe the mailers that have come across my desk and the ads that I've watched, we...[INSERT local examples.]

Here in Menlo Park, right next door to our campus, where we have several major projects pending with the city, we are deciding on Measure P, and if you believe the extremes on this housing issue, the choice is either a heartless NIMBY veto or skyscrapers in downtown Menlo Park.

Again, I'm not telling you how to vote, but you should vote, and we have a vested interest in these decisions, so do you. Measure RTM is something many are considering, around a sales tax increase for public transit that both sides see as having existential stakes.

Underneath these mailers and ads are real problems that many people on both sides of the issue and throughout our communities feel. Essential workers can't afford to live where they work, and shop owners know they can't survive years of construction and no parking.

As a somewhat recent transplant TO the Bay Area, I can assure you we don't have an affordability problem; we have an affordability crisis in just about every area of life, and how we vote is going to have an impact regarding housing, schools, healthcare, transit...the stakes are big.

I want to offer a couple of historical framings that might help us view our politics through our faith in a way that doesn't deify, vilify, or dismiss the issues. So what's really at stake? A lot. People sitting near you are juggling their rent, their kid's school, their health care, or their job as they weigh the decisions we're about to make.

For many of us, this isn't abstract, and I won't pretend it is. One of the most helpful ways I've found to hold this comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th-century scholar and pastor. He wrote about the difference between the ultimate and the penultimate.

The ultimate is the last word God speaks over a life: the grace of Jesus. Penultimate literally means next to last; it's everything that comes before that word...bread, housing, justice, a city, state, or country that works. He argues that the penultimate matters because of the ultimate.

You don't love a hungry person by preaching at their stomach; you feed them. The things on our ballots are penultimate things; they're important, just not the most important. He also named a couple of ways we get this wrong. The first he called radicalism, where the ultimate is all that matters.

Given our political landscape, it can feel tempting to hold onto this one for mental and emotional self-preservation, but it isn't helpful or faithful. The second one is called compromise. The penultimate becomes everything. The next-to-last thing starts looking like the only thing.

We can detect one of these drifts by what we talk about in these weeks leading up to November: where is our hope? What are we saying we'll do or won't do if our 'side' loses the election? Have we thanked God for the opportunity to live and learn about issues, and to have the freedom to vote?

Now think about those mailers; almost all of them frame their success or failure by borrowing ultimate language to offer you promises while selling you penultimate solutions. The other frame I want you to carry comes from Dutch pastor-turned-Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper.

He talked about life in spheres; life under God isn't a top-down list, it's circles. There's government, the church, the family, and the world of work, school, and neighbors. Each sphere has God-ordained work to do and authority to do it, and Jesus is Lord of all of it.

Government has real work to do: justice, order, roads, and yea, how land gets used in downtown Menlo Park. That's God-given work, and your vote is how you take part. But government can't do the church's work, and it wasn't meant to.

It can't make you a good neighbor; it can't sit with the widow on your street or the unhoused person you walk by downtown, and it never repairs relationships. Catholic social teaching has a word for this: subsidiarity.

A problem belongs at the smallest level that can solve it. Some problems are way too big for a family and need the church or even the state. Some problems are too personal for a state and need a family, a church, or a neighbor.

Both are true, and elections often only show us one potential solution for all of them. Here's where we often get off track: when we treat good things like they are ultimate things and ignore the circles of God-ordained work, we make demands our politics can't carry.

Ultimately, "When politics becomes primary, identity becomes fragile." It gets fragile because if who you are lives in the government sphere, it gets voted on every two years. Your sense of self rises and falls with election results. But you were made for something bigger than a ballot.

Let me push on this a little. Most of us didn't choose our political reflexes. We absorbed them over time. Nobody sat you down and taught you to roll your eyes when a certain name comes up, or to assume you know exactly what kind of person puts a certain sign in their yard.

You learned it at red lights and while scrolling your feed, a few minutes at a time, for years. So do the math on your own week. Add up the minutes you spent with the feed. Add up the minutes you spent with Jesus. The bigger total is probably doing more forming than the smaller one.

I get it. Staying informed feels like loving your neighbor, and sometimes it is. But somewhere along the way, a lot of us stopped looking to be informed and started looking for entertainment or something that gave language to our anger.

So with all of that as the backdrop, let's consider the words of the Apostle Paul, written to the church at Colossae in the first century. Paul wrote, "having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."

As I mentioned earlier, today we will celebrate baptism, when people go public with their faith by following Jesus' example. That act was so central and universal in the early church that Paul could use it to convey the very idea of following Jesus personally; they were synonymous.

Your destiny is secured no matter the outcome of any event or election. A chapter later, Paul adds this: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Paul is writing to a group of people who depended heavily on Roman rule, and the implicit social contract was that you could hold a religion as long as you saw Caesar as Lord...in other words, politics had to be primary, and Paul was making a very different point.

When Paul connects our identity in Jesus to something hidden, he's not saying secret; he means it's secure. A few years before Nero turned on Christians in Rome, Paul is giving them a view of who they really are and that what matters most isn't on the ballot.

Now, some of us hear "set your minds on things above" as permission to check out of everything below. Scholar N.T. Wright puts it this way: "Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world." Paul isn't giving us an escape hatch.

He's giving us a vision for the way we bring who we are in Jesus to all things, from how we vote, to how we spend our money, to how we care for our family and friends. God longs for our identity in Him to shape how we hold onto Heavenly hope in all areas of our lives.

One of the verses we remember around baptism is Galatians 2:20, which says, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

We relate to Jesus' sacrifice in unique ways at baptism as we remember His death on our behalf and trust in His resurrection for this new identity. We have only ever received this identity; we can't achieve it, and we don't need to defend it. We seek to bring it to every part of our lives.

Here's a warning light, and let's check it together right now. In the quiet of your own head, name one issue where following Jesus has made you uncomfortable with your own side. Not the other side. Yours. If something came to mind fast, good. If you had to think hard, pay attention to that.

And if nothing came at all, I say this with love: your politics may have started filtering your faith. This lands differently depending on where you sit. Most of our room leans one direction, and if that's you, the temptation is to believe Jesus needs your platform to stay credible. He doesn't.

If you feel like you're in the political minority here and you've wondered whether there's still a seat for you, there is, and Jesus doesn't fit inside your platform either. The gospel is more radical than any political movement. Sooner or later He challenges all of us.

The gospel (the good news about Jesus) isn't advice about how to reach God. It's news about what God has already done. Jesus died on a Roman cross and walked out of a grave three days later, and by that resurrection God declared Him Lord of everything.

That's the announcement. What makes it good news for you, and not just big news for the world, is that the King who now rules is the same King who went to the cross in your place. He carried your sin so you could be forgiven, fully and for good.

You can't earn your way into His kingdom. You're welcomed into it by grace, through faith, and that's what we'll see in the water today. People who were buried with Him are raised with Him, and they step into a kingdom that isn't waiting on any election to come true.

So let me take you to an uncomfortable place for a minute. Imagine your worst-case scenario this fall, and beyond this fall, into the next several elections. Imagine a 'not so distant' future in which our country and communities end up somewhere you don't think we can come back from.

For some of you, that picture is a country where the people you care about most are left unprotected. For others, it's a country that has walked away from the things you believe brought it together in the first place. I read and listen to these concerns often.

And I'm not saying any of that to scare you, and I'm certainly not hoping for it. We should vote and get involved in part to prevent a future like this from happening. That is the penultimate idea Bonhoeffer talked about, and it matters.

But if it does happen, if the thing you fear most comes true, you could have something in common with the first people who received a letter we call 1 Peter. Let me put it this way, if your side loses this fall, and the next time, and the time after that, does your faith survive?

Not your mood. Your faith. The people Peter wrote to had no vote and no side that was ever going to win. And their neighbors started asking what on earth made these people different.

He is writing to them in a place where they had no political power and were slandered by their neighbors and beginning to suffer for following Jesus. In his sign-off, Peter says he's writing from Babylon, which was an early church nickname for Rome. The capital of the world was still exile.

Here's what he said, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

This entire section is intentionally political language. Peter borrows words from Exodus 19 and assigns them to a scattered minority with zero political power. Nobody voted them into this...God called them into it. They were a divine nation that no one ever got to vote on.

They he continues, "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."

Peter isn't commanding them to wage a violent rebellion or even work to take over. He also doesn't tell them to check out. He tells them that their posture should be that of thoughtful witnesses of Jesus who live so well that even people speaking against them would see God.

This approach worked: about a hundred years after they received this letter, there was an anonymous letter that described Christians this way, "They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners... Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign."

So here's our reality for Election Day. Whatever passes and whoever wins, teachers in our communities can't afford to live where they work, and people eat alone while no one notices them. We shouldn't let the overwhelming problem of solving everything keep us from doing anything.

The ballot asks you one question every couple of years. Jesus asks you a different one every day. So here's where to start this week. The next time a political headline hits you, before you share it or fire off the text to the group chat, give it sixty seconds.

Notice what's happening in your body. Ask what that story is trying to form in you. Pray for the people in it on both sides, by name if you can. Then engage, if you still want to. We'll call it the Headline Practice. This is small on purpose.

The feed shaped you a few minutes at a time, and Jesus is patient enough to reshape you the same way. Next week we'll examine what our reactions to those headlines are actually telling us about us.

In a few minutes, we'll see people who chose to follow Jesus personally go public with their faith and that same step is available to you. So one last time, and don't answer it fast. Who are you, really? If the honest answer is about anything other than Jesus, you'll spend November afraid, because your identity will feel fragile.

If the answer is Jesus, you're free. You can vote with conviction and still sleep on election night. You can lose without despair and win without gloating. When people come up out of that water today, this room is going to erupt, and nobody cheering will know how they voted.

Peter called that a holy nation. Nobody voted it into existence, and no election is going to vote it out. Would you pray with me?