



**PICKING A  
PRESIDENT**  
**Seven Characteristics to Evaluate**



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# PICKING A PRESIDENT

Seven Characteristics to Evaluate



What do you look for in the person you'd choose to be the next president of the United States? What causes you to confidently walk into a voting booth and cast your ballot? Parents, what type of person do you want your children to remember as our country's leader?

I believe that in answering these questions, we often make the same mistake as the political pundits on CNN and Fox News. We want to know how the candidate will solve the problems facing our country.

- What are the candidate's plans to stabilize the stock market?
- How will the candidate deal with gasoline prices?

- How will the candidate keep the country safe?
- What is the candidate's position on taxes?
- What will the candidate do with the issue of unemployment?
- What is the candidate's plan for Social Security?
- What is the candidate's position on healthcare?
- What is the candidate's record on environmental matters?
- What is the candidate's position on societal concerns?

These are all very important issues, and certainly we need to be properly informed. But I believe the candidate's plans and proposals should be secondary in our voting decision. Let's face it—many of the bills a president proposes don't survive the House and Senate. If they do, they can look very different than what was first presented in the stump speeches. Besides that, we don't know what will happen next week or next month that could completely change the landscape. Certainly no one knew that eight months after George W. Bush took office, the events of 9/11 would transpire. Whether

you agree with his actions or not, the events of that day have defined his presidency.

Abraham Lincoln was the only American president whose entire administration was bookended by war. The day he took office, he received a letter from Major Robert Anderson informing him that the garrison at Fort Sumter must be withdrawn or resupplied at the risk of war. Lincoln took the risk. Four years later, Lincoln was assassinated at Ford's Theatre, just five days after General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox.<sup>1</sup> Lincoln said, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me."<sup>2</sup>

While national and world events may alter a person's plans, one thing determines how a leader leads—character. You have to know "the inner reality in which thoughts, speech, decision, behavior, and relations are rooted." That's how Os Guinness defines character in *When No One Sees*. And in the very next line he wrote, "As such, character determines behavior just as behavior demonstrates character."<sup>3</sup>

## Behavior Reveals Character



The Bible recounts many illustrations of individuals whose behavior reveals their true

person. King Saul provides an apt example.

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel wanted a king. So God let them have their pick. They chose a man named Saul primarily because of his outward appearance. Saul was “the most handsome man in Israel—head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the land” (1 Samuel 9:2). But soon after the votes were cast, buyer’s remorse set in. Inside Saul’s impressive stature was a shriveled heart. He was imprudent, impulsive, and unrepentant.

Added into the mix of his unfortunate character, Saul lived by the polls of popular opinion. He was more concerned about pleasing people than doing what was right. After an outright act of disobedience, the prophet Samuel confronted the king. Saul’s response was telling. He said, “I know I have sinned. But please, at least honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel ...” (1 Samuel 15:30). Needless to say, Israel experienced some difficult days while following Saul, a leader who lacked character.

After Saul, God put a man named David in office. He wasn’t perfect. No leader is. But he was a man of character. His leadership is summarized in Psalm 78:72, “And David shepherded them with **integrity of heart**; with skillful hands he led them” (NIV) (emphasis mine). Notice that

“integrity of heart” comes before “skillful hands.” *Integrity* means “wholeness” and “completeness.” It describes a person who has character.

Certainly we want a leader with skillful hands. But since we don’t know all of the skills he or she will need to deal with issues that may very well change the day he or she takes office, we first need a leader with integrity of heart.

## The Virtues a Leader Needs



Daniel Taylor, a former professor at Bethel University, and Mark McCloskey, a professor at Bethel Seminary, wrote an article in *Christianity Today* back in 2008 that does a great job of breaking down this issue of character, so you can understand and evaluate it. They list seven necessary character qualities, which they call “the cardinal virtues.”<sup>4</sup> As we go through the seven virtues these men proposed, write them down and use them as a checklist while you pray to determine whom you will choose on Election Day.

### Virtue 1: Moral Courage



Taylor and McCloskey wrote, “Moral courage is the ability to do what’s right even when it is deeply



unpopular, even dangerous.” I’d also add that it takes moral courage to do something that’s not politically expedient. It involves doing something that has a real possibility of loss. The action may cause you to lose friends, your reputation, or your political position. In extreme cases you could even lose your freedom or your life. For example, when our Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, they were putting their freedom, wealth, and lives on the line. That’s moral courage! Historian Barbara Tuchman wrote, “Aware of the controlling power of ambition, corruption and emotion, it may be that in search for wiser government we should look for the test of character first. And the test should be moral courage.”<sup>5</sup> The apostle Paul said it like this, “Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13).

As you prayerfully determine whom to vote for, here’s a question to consider: *Which candidate has demonstrated moral courage?* Look for a record of conviction even when it may have threatened his or her political career. It was said of Nobel Peace Prize winner George Marshall (for whom the post–World War II European Recovery Program, or the Marshall Plan, is named), “He told the truth even when it hurt his cause.” Moral courage is an essential ingredient of character.

## Virtue 2: Prudence



Prudence is the ability to exercise sound judgment in practical matters. Prudence is not about being intelligent. There are many intelligent people who make very foolish decisions. Prudence is not just about being knowledgeable. There are a lot of impractical people with a head full of knowledge. Practical wisdom is the ability to put knowledge into practice.

We have many important issues in our country. Illegal immigration calls for the need to control our borders and determine what to do with the illegal immigrants who are already living here. We all want security from terrorism, but we differ on some of the proposed means to reach that goal. We all use energy, but we differ on what we should do to get it. There are many political problems that present no good choice. Whatever the decision, some will disagree.

Prudence in a leader is critical. And, quite honestly, it's an area where one's personal life is fair game. It is very reasonable to want to know how a person seeking the most powerful position in the world has demonstrated wisdom in his or her personal life. Blaise Pascal said, "The strength of a man's virtue should not be measured by his special efforts, but by his ordinary course of action."

## Virtue 3: Justice



Justice is the bedrock of free society. We must fight against injustice. Scripture is clear that we must take care of the poor and needy, widows, orphans, and the unborn. Justice means honoring life from conception to natural death. Proverbs 31:8 says, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed.”

Justice is more than a stump speech applause line. We should have access to the candidates’ actions in their private lives before they sought public office. Before they were trying to impress us and get our vote, did they care for the poor? Were they generous?

Justice often shows itself in personal pocketbook giving. I read about a former vice president who contributed almost nothing out of his own pocket to charitable causes—until he needed to position himself to run for the presidency. We need to be able to see if the candidate demonstrated justice before he or she wanted our vote.

## Virtue 4: Temperance



Temperance, while not the most attractive virtue, tells us so much about a candidate. Taylor and

McCloskey wrote, “Temperance is self-restraint, the ability to control (even say ‘no’ to) harmful drives, impulses, and passions.... It is an expression of discipline and self-mastery that allows a leader to function under pressure, including external pressure from extremists and ideologues to act rashly to accomplish immediate and simplistic goals.”<sup>6</sup> Scripture says a church leader must be “temperate” and “self-controlled” (1 Timothy 3:2 NIV). We should expect nothing less in our national leaders.

A great illustration of temperance was found in President Abraham Lincoln. After the South was defeated during the Civil War, some extremists wanted to wipe all Southerners off the map. Lincoln refused such harsh action, and in doing so he started a healing process for the nation.

It is said that Harry Truman wrote many angry letters and memos. One letter even called for the destruction of every major Russian city. But Truman had the temperance never to send those letters.

George Washington was another president who demonstrated temperance. He was able to walk away from power when people were begging him to stay in office and become a king.

## Virtue 5: Faith



Faith is the commitment to be part of a story larger than yourself. A president must demonstrate faith in the ideals of our country and Constitution. But the virtue of faith on a believer's voting checklist goes deeper than that. We need to know where the candidate stands with God. This will impact a candidate's core values about life, marriage, and family.

In 1960, John F. Kennedy told a group of Protestant ministers that if he were elected president, his personal religious faith, Catholicism, would not interfere with his presidential duties. But how can your sincere religious values not impact your decisions?

William Wilberforce was elected to the British Parliament in 1780 at the age of 21. Young and smart, Wilberforce loved to party. And now he was being welcomed into luxurious clubs and great private houses. He was on everyone's invitation list. In 1784, he was on his way to the French Riviera with his former tutor, Isaac Milner. Milner told Wilberforce about Christ and, in Wilberforce's words, a "great change" began to take place. During the summer of the following year, Wilberforce embraced Christianity. His first impulse was to retire

from politics. But John Newton, the former slave trader turned minister who wrote the song “Amazing Grace,” convinced him not to leave Parliament.

Wilberforce believed God was calling him to two great goals—the abolition of the slave trade, and the reformation of the low state of British morals. After years of tireless effort, Parliament voted to end the slave trade in 1807. In 1833—three days before Wilberforce died—the House of Commons abolished slavery throughout the British Empire, giving freedom to 800,000 slaves.

Now compare Wilberforce to James Buchanan who served as president of the United States from 1857 to 1861. Buchanan was personally opposed to slavery, but he did nothing about it. He was more concerned with the nation’s economy and building roads. But how can you truly be against something as tragic as slavery and not do something about it? Faith is based on belief in something and Someone greater than yourself. And while dealing with the issues is important, there must be a greater calling—a moral calling—in your life.

There are many issues that need to be addressed in our country. We need leaders who will look at these through the lens of a Judeo-Christian faith.

## Virtue 6: Hope



Hope is not merely wishing something would happen. Taylor and McCloskey write that hope “is a reasonable expectation based on past experience.” It is reasonable to hope that America continues to be a country that stands for justice, because America has acted justly in the past—not perfectly, but justly. Hope is not just a plan or a recitation of policies; hope is not an inspirational speech. We have to ask this important question: *What have the candidates done in their past to be able to talk about hope today?*

When Martin Luther King Jr. packed the National Mall in Washington D.C. and gave his “I Have a Dream” speech, the hope he shared meant something because of what he had already accomplished. Hope is a reasonable expectation of where a leader can lead us based on where he or she has led others in the past.

## Virtue 7: Love



One writer said, “If love is the greatest of biblical virtues, it is ... the home for all the virtues.” We demonstrate moral courage in order to protect the people and things we love. Love causes us to fight

for justice. We desire to demonstrate prudence and temperance for those we love. Taylor and McCloskey wrote,

It is very difficult to assess the quality of love in political candidates. Perhaps one manifestation of it is passion. *Passion* comes from the Greek word for pain or suffering. To say we love something or are passionate about something is a declaration that we are willing to suffer for it. What are candidates passionate about? That is, what are they willing to suffer for? What have they spent their lives doing apart from jobs and political office? What loves or passions made them pursue a political office?<sup>7</sup>

## A Person of Character



American journalist Hugh Sidey once noted the importance of character in our nation's leader:

The presidency to this day rests more on the character of the person who inhabits the office than on anything else. The Founding



Fathers designed it that way. It was their idea to find a man in America with a great character and let him invest a tradition and shape a national character.<sup>8</sup>

Prayerfully vote for the candidate who is a person of character. He or she will face many situations that are unknown. During the president's time in office, there will be many situations where his or her policies, positions, and stump speeches will offer little help. A president must be a person of character.

## Two Important Things to Remember



First, no matter what happens on Election Day, God will still be God when the sun comes up the next morning. God's will *will* be done. If your candidate wins, don't assume the millennial kingdom has arrived. As Charles Colson was fond of saying, "The kingdom of God will not arrive on Air Force One no matter how good the president's character or great his ability." And if your candidate loses, don't think America as we know it will end.

Pray for this election like you pray for everything else—for God's will to be done. When it's over, act like a Christian. If your candidate wins, act like a Christian—God is on the throne. If

your candidate loses, act like a Christian—God is on the throne.

Years ago, a presidential candidate was elected who did not conform to the evangelical ideal. The joke going around was, “Here’s the prayer that I’m praying for the president: ‘Let his years be few; let someone else take his position’” (Psalm 109:8). But these people, many of whom taught the need to take Scripture in its full context, didn’t mention the continuation of the psalm:

*May his children become fatherless, and his wife a widow. May his children wander as beggars and be driven from their ruined homes. May creditors seize his entire estate, and strangers take all he has earned. Let no one be kind to him; let no one pity his fatherless children. May all his offspring die. May his family name be blotted out in the next generation. May the LORD never forget the sins of his fathers; may his mother’s sins never be erased from the record. (Psalm 109:9–14)*

The joke loses its humor when the verse is read in context.

I read a cartoon recently where a guy was standing at the pearly gates before St. Peter. Peter said: “You were a believer, yes. But you skipped the not-being-a-jerk-about-it part.” Follow Christ, but leave out the “being-a-jerk-about-it” part.

Second, let’s suppose all the “right” people are elected—the president, representatives, senators, governors, school board members, right down to the local dog catcher. I know not all of those positions are going to be on the ballot, but let’s just suppose. So you wake up on the Wednesday following the election, and everything is exactly the way you want it. Let me ask you ...

- Would that usher in the Kingdom of God?
- Would all marriages be models of faithful love?
- Would all singles remain pure and wait for marriage?
- Would parents love their children with an unconditional love?
- Would a runaway child come back home?
- Would child abuse end that day? Would child trafficking come to a halt?

## SEVEN CHARACTERISTICS TO EVALUATE

- Would all the unborn be protected?
- Would materialism and greed be a thing of the past?
- Would drugs cease to exist in our schools?
- Would your children and grandchildren automatically come to Christ?

We need to pray and we need to vote; but no matter what happens on election Tuesday, our greatest work and mission is still ahead of us. Life transformation is not legislated. It occurs from the inside out. Presidents can't transform a heart ... only Jesus can do that.

## PICKING A PRESIDENT

### Endnotes

- 1 James M. McPherson, *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-In-Chief* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), p. xiii.
- 2 Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume VII, "Letter to Albert G. Hodges" (April 4, 1864), p. 281.
- 3 Os Guinness and Virginia Mooney, *When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in an Age of Image*, Trinity Forum Study Series (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 2000).
- 4 Daniel Taylor and Mark McCloskey, "How to Pick a President: Why Virtue Trumps Policy," *Christianity Today* (Vol. 52, No. 6), June 2008, [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/june/17.22.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/june/17.22.html).
- 5 Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 410.
- 6 Taylor and McCloskey, p. 4.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

