Who Are You, Really?

Phil EuBank · Beyond the Ballot · Colossians 2:12; Colossians 3:1-4; Galatians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:9-12

AT A GLANCE

In the opening message of Beyond the Ballot, a four-week series preached on Baptism Sunday at Menlo Church, Phil EuBank argues that the election is real but penultimate, and that the feed quietly forms us to make it ultimate. Against a fragile identity staked on results, he re-anchors believers in Colossians, Galatians, and 1 Peter: identity in Christ is received, hidden, secure, and never on the ballot. Next week turns to what our reactions to headlines reveal.

- Ballot issues are real and worth voting on, yet they are penultimate; they cannot carry the weight of ultimate promises campaigns attach to them.
- Political reflexes are absorbed, not chosen, a few minutes of feed at a time, so whatever gets the most minutes is forming you.
- Identity in Christ is received, never achieved or defended, hidden and secure in him, so it survives any election result.

> *"When politics becomes primary, identity becomes fragile."*

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

Colossians 2:12 — When you were baptized, you were buried with Christ, and you were raised up with him because of your faith in God's power. God's power was shown when he raised Christ from death. (ERV)

Colossians 3:1-4 — [1]You were raised from death with Christ. So live for what is in heaven, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. [2]Think only about what is up there, not what is here on earth. [3]Your old self has died, and your new life is kept with Christ in God. [4]Yes, Christ is now your life, and when he comes again, you will share in his glory. (ERV)

Galatians 2:20 — So I am not the one living now—it is Christ living in me. I still live in my body, but I live by faith in the Son of God. He is the one who loved me and gave himself to save me. (ERV)

1 Peter 2:9-12 — [9]But you are his chosen people, the King's priests. You are a holy nation, people who belong to God. He chose you to tell about the wonderful things he has done. He brought you out of the darkness of sin into his wonderful light. [10]In the past you were not a special people, but now

> you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now God has given you his mercy.
> [11]Dear friends, you are like visitors and strangers in this world. So I beg you to keep your lives free from the evil things you want to do, those desires that fight against your true selves. [12]People who don't believe are living all around you. They may say that you are doing wrong. So live such good lives that they will see the good you do, and they will give glory to God on the day he comes. (ERV)

The argument

The Ballot Matters at Its Proper Scale — Bonhoeffer's penultimate and Kuyper's spheres keep politics from being deified or dismissed

Phil EuBank refuses both deifying and dismissing the ballot. Borrowing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he names the grace of Jesus and the kingdom as ultimate, and bread, housing, justice, and a working city as penultimate: 'next to last,' yet important, because they give credibility to the message of Jesus. Bonhoeffer's two errors are radicalism, where only the ultimate matters, and compromise, where 'the next to last thing becomes the last thing.' Mailers commit the second, borrowing ultimate language while selling penultimate solutions that 'actually can't do what they're promising to do.' Abraham Kuyper adds scale: circles of sovereignty, each with God-ordained work, all under Jesus' lordship. Government has real work, but 'it can't make you a good neighbor.' Subsidiarity says to solve a problem at the smallest possible level.

> **Insight —** *Hold political stakes at their right scale: real enough to vote on, never large enough to carry what only the ultimate can.*

Our Political Reflexes Are Absorbed, Not Chosen — Formation happens a few minutes at a time, whether or not anyone is tracking it

'Nobody sat you down and taught you to roll your eyes when a certain name came up on the screen.' Phil EuBank traces how we learned it anyway: a parent at a red light explaining a bumper sticker, then years of scrolling a few minutes at a time. His audit: add up the minutes with the feed, add up the minutes with Jesus, and 'the bigger the total is probably the one doing the forming.' Staying informed can be loving, but many have gone 'from being informed to being infuriated,' using news to feel justified that the other side is not merely wrong but evil. The cost is identity: if a policy or politician becomes core to who I am, 'then you're getting voted on every two years.'

> **Insight —** *What forms you is measured in minutes, not intentions, so audit your week before assuming your convictions came from the gospel.*

Identity in Christ Is Received, Hidden, and Therefore Secure — Colossians and Galatians ground belonging before engagement

Phil EuBank turns to Paul, who ties baptism to identity: 'buried with him in baptism… raised with him through faith,' and, a chapter later, 'your life is hidden with Christ in God.' He reads

'hidden' as secure rather than secret. Paul's Roman readers could worship anything so long as Caesar was Lord; Jesus had to be primary. Yet N.T. Wright's line, 'heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world,' blocks escapism: this identity reshapes votes, money, family. Galatians 2:20 closes the circle: 'You have only ever received that identity. You can never achieve it. You can't pay it back.' And you don't have to defend it. His test, offered 'with love': name one issue where following Jesus makes you uncomfortable with your side; if none comes, 'your politics have already started to filter your faith.'

> **Insight —** *Because identity is given rather than earned, it needs no defending, and that freedom lets faith, not party, shape every vote.*

A Nation Nobody Voted Into Existence Outlasts Every Election — Peter writes to exiles with no vote and calls them a holy nation

'If your side loses this fall and the next time and the time after that, will your faith survive? Not your attitude, not your mood.' EuBank sets 1 Peter beside that question: its readers had no vote, no side to win, and slandering neighbors. Peter signs off from 'Babylon,' which EuBank calls an early church nickname for Rome, and still assigns scattered exiles Exodus-19 language: chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation. 'Nobody voted them into this. God called them into it.' Their posture was neither violence, nor takeover, nor withdrawal, but honorable lives so that even critics 'would see God.' He cites an anonymous letter, which he places about a hundred years later, describing Christians as sojourners everywhere. 'Could the same thing be said of us?' The freedom that follows: 'you can lose without despair and you can win without gloating.'

> **Insight —** *A people God called together cannot be voted out, so the real test of an election is whether your faith, not your mood, survives it.*

Cross-references

- Exodus 19:5-6 — the source of Peter's 'holy nation' language, now given to a powerless scattered minority
- Matthew 5:13 — salt of the earth as a preservation tool in a decaying world, the reason to vote and engage
- 1 Peter 5:13 — Peter's sign-off from 'Babylon' as an early church nickname for Rome, marking exile

DEVOTIONAL

Someone climbs out of the water, dripping and laughing, and the room erupts. Nobody cheering knows how that person will vote. Nobody asked. The welcome was never contingent on a platform. Consider where the rest of the week goes. A few minutes here, a few minutes there, the feed teaching the eyes to roll and the heart to assume. No one set out to be formed

that way. It happened an inch at a time, while no one was tracking it. Beneath all of it runs a quieter fact. Your life is hidden with Christ in God: not hidden like a secret, but hidden like something kept safe. It was never earned, so it cannot be repossessed. It never needed defending, so you may set the shield down. Peter wrote to people with no vote and no side to win, and called them a holy nation. No ballot made them one, and no ballot could unmake them. They simply lived so well that even those who spoke against them might catch sight of God. The ballot will ask what you prefer. Answer it, with conviction and compassion. But Jesus keeps asking a different question, patiently, a few minutes at a time: who are you, really? Let the answer be small enough to fit in a name and large enough to hold the night the results come in.

Reflection

- When you tally your week, which gets more of your minutes, the feed or time with Jesus, and what is each one teaching you to assume about other people?
- Where has following Jesus made you uncomfortable with your own side, and what might it mean if nothing comes to mind quickly?
- If the outcome you most dread came true this fall, what in you would be shaken, and what would remain because it is hidden with Christ?

Closing prayer

God, thank you that in a world so fractured and broken, your hand of love and mercy is still on it. We feel overwhelmed by real consequences of real decisions. Help who we are in you to be the most true thing about us, the thing everything else flows from. At our dinner tables and in our text messages, help us show up as thoughtful witnesses, pursuing you, trusting you, and believing that your work in us and through us is far from done. Nudge those who are thinking about going public with their faith. In Jesus' name, amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

The ballot asks about your preferences for the coming years; Jesus asks you a very different question every day: who are you, really?

This week

This week, the next time a political headline grabs you, wait sixty seconds before sharing or texting. Notice what is happening in your body and ask what the story is trying to form in you. Then pray for the people in the story, on both sides, by name, for them rather than about them; then engage.

Return to Colossians 3:1-4