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### Footnotes: Talking Trump? + 12 Things about 12 Rules

Bob Turner

*Harding School of Theology*

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# Footnotes<sup>1</sup>

Curated Resources for Ministers



## Talking Trump?

April 2, 2018

### Footnotes Roundtable

Without question the election and first year of Donald Trump has brought a renewed interest in talking about the president. Whether it be love, hate, irritation, or admiration—it is hard to find anyone who is indifferent. Or, as the old hymn goes, “neutral you cannot be.” But what about sermons? Should preachers interact with the American presidency in such a way that they routinely reference the president? Do mentions of Trump strengthen the church to engage the broader culture or do they simply affirm that the church has lost its way and has let Washington script the talking points? Our panel will help us find out:

*Brandon Pierce is the Senior Minister for the Stamford Church of Christ (CT).*

*Robert Perez is the Minister for the Santa Paula Church of Christ (CA).*

*Eric Gentry is the Associate Preaching Minister for the Highland Church of Christ (TN).*

*Dorn Muscar is the Minister for the University Park Church of Christ (MD).*

#### Do you refer to Donald Trump much in your preaching? Do you find that you make more/less references to him than you did previous American presidents?

**Brandon Pierce:** I grew up in a church that eschewed politics—likely a carryover of the spirit of Churches of Christ a century ago—and I more or less embraced that ethos. So the impulse to speak on things or people of an explicitly political nature does not come from within. That is, I’m not particularly inclined to do so, even with the current president. To my knowledge I have not referenced Trump explicitly in any sermon.

**Robert Perez:** No. I don’t talk at all about Trump in my preaching. However, I have found myself having to comment on Trump’s negative portrayal in the media, and sometimes inappropriate comments on Twitter, especially because I voted for him. However, I have not done so from the pulpit.

**Eric Gentry:** No. There is a temptation, no matter your political ideology, to glorify or vilify individual leaders, rather than attending to the systems and structures empowering them. Trump’s comments and actions continue to raise important questions for discussion, but we must realize that he only represents the broader spirit, values, and desires of many in this country.

**Dorn Muscar:** I have not and do not intend to refer to Trump in any sermon by name. However, I have not referred to any other president by name, perhaps other than Abraham Lincoln. I have referred to the president, as an office of authority, to bring a modern parallel of what the Lord did in washing the disciples’ feet, for example. I used that when President Obama was in office. Now I think such an illustration would get sneers because humility is not a quality we have seen in our current president. Safe to say Trump’s controversial nature causes me to want to keep him out of my sermons.

When I first came to serve this congregation, I asked one of the elders about how politics affect the unity of the congregation. He told me about one Wednesday night after President Bush was re-elected; one person was elated and another person was in tears. This told me just how different and important politics are for many of the people I teach to each Sunday. He also showed me a member’s attendance card that had a comment with something to the effect that they did not come to hear a political point of view, but a message from God’s word. This was after he preached a sermon in support of one of the presidential candidates, or after an inauguration.

My own perspective is that Christ unites members of the body of Christ. Politics divide people into at least two major camps, and I know there are members in these two camps in our congregation without even asking. I need to preach in such a way as to help us “maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). I want to preach in a way that keeps people of these two camps focused not on agreeing politically, but abiding in fellowship together based on a common faith in Christ.

#### Occasionally after some social topic flares up (immigration, women’s march, LGBTQ rights), someone will tweet something like, “if your pastor doesn’t address \_\_\_\_\_ in the sermon tomorrow, leave and find a new church.” What is your response to such a statement?

**BP:** I think that statement has the currency it does precisely because of its hyperbolic nature. I wonder if the people who say these things even buy into the radical ethos they are commending. Nevertheless, there is something to this statement. I would be a little worried if every Sunday was just another punditry show in theological dress. But if your church never addresses social issues, or never addresses the political realities behind these issues, or if they only do so in a way that makes the point to be who you should vote for come next election, then I think that points to some problematic areas in your church that you should find the courage to say something about.

**EG:** First, I would contend with the consumerist language of this statement. If your relationship with a church is based on what your preacher says on any given week, the relationship will be short-lived. Being part of a church is a covenantal relationship, not a consumerist one. Second, too many ministers feel it is incumbent to address in Sunday’s sermon any issue raised in the week beforehand. Although I admire the desire to be timely, this approach often leads to rushed commentary, when a more thoughtful and formative response might have been developed given more time. Where I serve, we often acknowledge those pressing issues or events in the form of prayer on Sunday, but will typically only return to them in a sermon after more time for thoughtful preparation. With these caveats aside, I do wish more preachers would address cultural topics in light of the Gospel. Social media should not be the exclusive source of worldview formation. Unfortunately, when the pulpit is silent on today’s most important topics, we turn over the formative responsibility of the church to these lesser mediums.

**DM:** Again, what holds us together is our faith in Christ. So, I do not see the value in bringing up social issues that I know people are going to argue about. I do not want to lose my credibility for Christ in an attempt to share my opinion on a current hot button topic. Frankly, I believe, most people in my congregation do not come to worship for my opinion on societal issues. They are coming to hear a message from God’s word that is going to help them live fruitful and fulfilling lives. I do not want to miss that mark.

However, there have been incidents that occurred during the week that I felt needed to be addressed. In those cases, I prepared a completely different sermon than I had earlier prepared. I do believe there are times to address major events, such as tragedies, because people in the congregation are disturbed by these things. God’s comfort and wisdom should be extended to meet these specific needs. Two such circumstances that come to mind are the riots in Baltimore after the rulings in the Freddie Gray case and the senseless killings of the Charleston Church massacre. These events were so pressing upon people, especially members of our congregation because of our demographics and location, that I needed to address them at length from the pulpit. These issues did have political undertones, but my aim was to root the congregation in a biblical perspective toward these situations.

#### Churches of Christ have a historical legacy of being somewhat non-political, at least early in their history. Surely that has changed during the past few decades. Do you see your preaching as formative in the political orientation of your congregation? Do you feel that your sermons respond to people’s pre-existent politics, or do you find that their political identities are shaped through the church’s teaching and preaching?

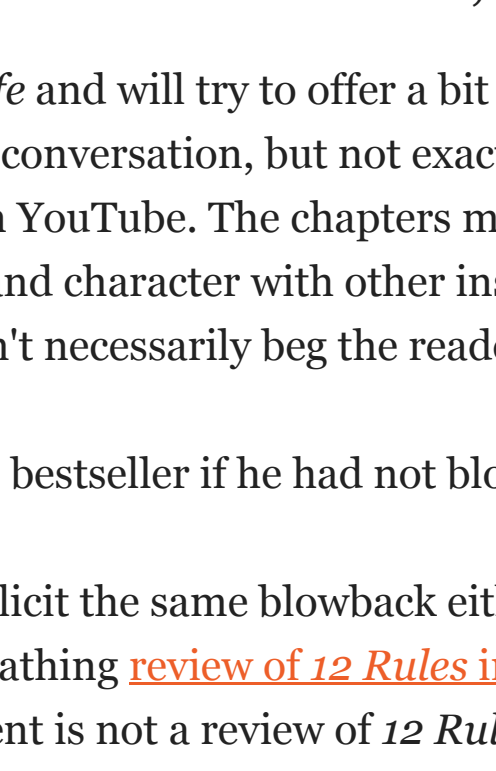
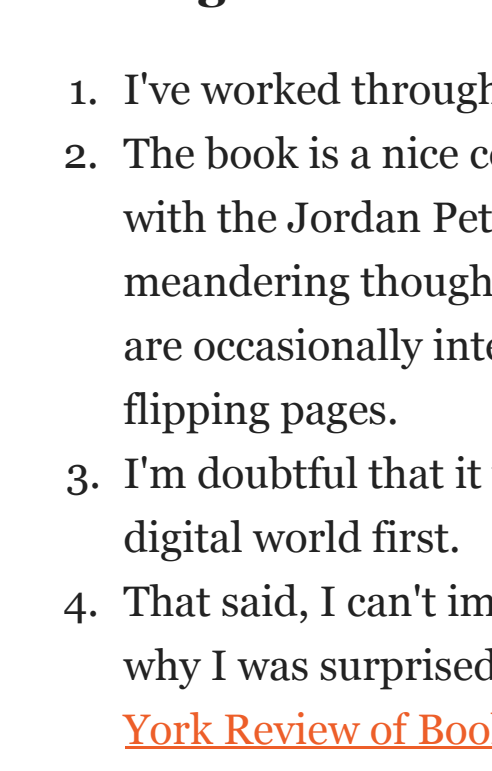
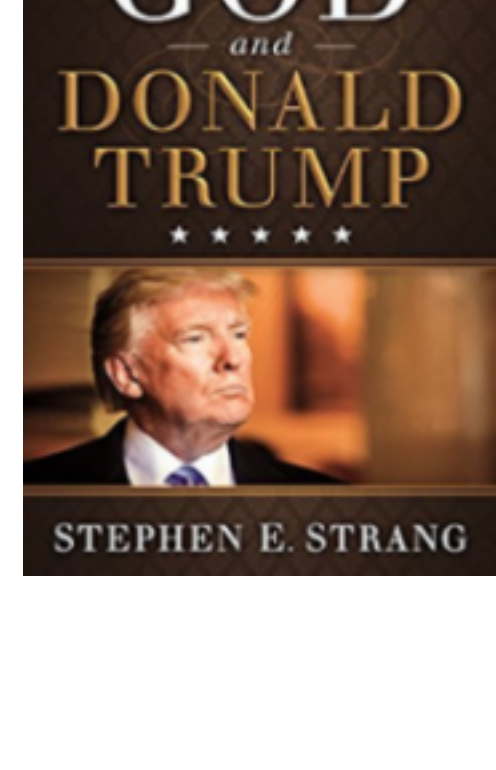
**BP:** We must recover the value of addressing social issues in our preaching and church life in general. It has been the privilege of many churches to be able to ignore social issues in the first place because we feel out of harm’s way whichever party wins or loses. Some don’t have that luxury, and many more today are realizing that they no longer have it either. So what I’m after in my preaching and all other ministerial affairs is to develop a theological lens through which to view life, and a theological grammar through which to discuss and analyze social or political or spiritual or any other matter. Keeping these worlds apart has perhaps not been our most productive habit because it has crippled our ability to think theologically about politics, as opposed to thinking politically about theology which seems to be the *modus operandi* of these days. If my preaching will have any formative effect in that regard, it will be over the course of decades, reinforced by relationships. Thinking theologically about social and political issues has to be a consistent feature of that timeline. I have little faith that the occasional sermon or even series about socio-political issues will have any lasting effect.

**EG:** I am shaped profoundly by those more apolitical streams of our movement. By this I mean that I view the solutions for the world’s problems as theological rather than political. The body of Christ is the hope for the world, and not Republicans or Democrats. When my sermons are prescriptive, astute listeners will notice that I am prescribing what the church should do (based on prayerful study of the Word), and not what governments should do. So, I hope that my sermons rub against our congregation’s pre-existent politics on both sides of the spectrum, in the way that the “manifold wisdom of God” has always challenged rulers and authorities of various positions (Eph 3:10).

**RP:** I’m reminded of a quote from Dean Kelley in his work on church growth that suggests if churches could “muster sufficient seriousness about what they profess to believe, they might cease to be blown from pillar to post by every breeze of cultural climate, every shift in demography or other contextual factors. They might even begin to affect some of the circumstances around them, to influence the cultural climate themselves, as their forebears did.” (Dean M. Kelley, “Commentary: Is Religion a Dependent Variable?” in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950-1978*, ed. Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 334-43.

**DM:** This is an excellent question that has never crossed my mind. It really has me wondering how my preaching does and should affect the congregation’s political viewpoint. At this point, my preaching does not directly address any political issue. I purposefully do not attempt to shape political views. I try to do what John Stott suggests, which is to preach in such a way that it helps members to further develop a Christian or Christian thinking that can be engaged toward specific issues. For instance, during the last presidential election I preached a six week series on being “Pilgrims of Christ” leading up to Election Day. My goal was not to discourage members from participating in the election, but to help them remember their calling in Christ. We were going to be so immersed in this hotly contested election. Therefore, we needed the stability that comes through remembering that we are exiles and pilgrims in this world. Regardless of who won, this essential calling remained the same. We should not allow the things of this life, in this case politics, to deter us from our confident trust in Christ and living each day for the will of God.

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### 12 Things About 12 Rules for Life: Jordan Peterson, Again.

1. I’ve worked through *12 Rules for Life* and will try to offer a bit of a review.
2. The book is a nice contribution to a YouTube, but not exactly on par with the Jordan Peterson we met on Conversation. The chapters mix meandering thoughts about virtue and character with other insights that are occasionally interesting, but don’t necessarily beg the reader to keep flipping pages.
3. I’m doubtful that it would become a bestseller if he had not blown up the digital world first.
4. That said, I can’t imagine it would elicit the same blowback either. That is why I was surprised to see such a scathing [review of 12 Rules in the New York Review of Books](#). That treatment is not a review of *12 Rules*, but instead a review of Jordan Peterson’s YouTube takes masquerading as a review of his book. [Related: can we stop using the word “populist” for someone we disagree with who happens to be popular? Being popular and being a populist are two different things.]
5. Peterson’s signature image in *12 Rules* is a lobster. For how other nervous system function. So, by understanding lobsters on a small scale we can draw implications for more developed creatures, such as humans.
6. He then discusses the sort of things that release serotonin into the brain of a lobster (and correspondingly, a human brain). Still there?
7. His research seems legitimate. I’m not sure I’m the best one to judge, though. My scientific expertise ends somewhere around dumping vinegar into a baking soda volcano.
8. Me? I’m torn. I’m hesitant to pretend to know something about the evolutionary patterns and biological qualities of crustaceans to make my points about social topics.
9. It just feels like an odd conversation. “*What are your thoughts on abortion?*” “*Well, first I’d like to ask you what you think about the biological ancestry of lobsters.*”
10. More importantly, I suspect ministers will lose more audiences than they’ll gain if their documentation resides exclusively in scientific articles that require a graphing calculator and a periodic table of the elements to interpret.
11. I did have one thought on a pastoral level: though he is making some fine points, Jordan Peterson is not exactly endorsing himself to people whose major filter for human thinkers is whether they appear nice or not nice. My experience has been that a bunch of these people tend to hang out in church.
12. In that regard, *12 Rules for Life* is worth reading, but not so much worth citing. I think I’ll let it ruminate in my head for worldview purposes, but maybe leave it out of my sermon notes.

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### A Few More Footnotes.

1. Christian Colleges negotiate the source of their funding and [their positions on LGBT matters](#).
2. “Church as usual will not work,” says Kathy Keller, reflecting on her [work with Redeemer Presbyterian in NYC over 30 years](#).
3. Richard Rex’s “[A Church in Doubt](#)” reviews Ross Douthat’s *To Change the Church*—an excellent view into current tensions in modern Catholicism.
4. Jonathan Haidt’s [Heterodox Academy](#).
5. Marilynnne Robinson considers “Subjects that have been excluded from the historical conversation,” in *What Are We Doing Here?* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018), [review by James K.A. Smith](#).

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FOOTNOTES helps church leaders discover the resources that will improve and sustain their ministries. It will regularly feature interviews, book recommendations, site reviews, and editorials. It is a project of Bob Turner. You can direct any questions or feedback to [bjturner@harding.edu](mailto:bjturner@harding.edu). Complaints can be sent to his [Juno account](#).

UPCOMING  
How Long, O Lord? A Conversation About Sermon Length  
Monday, April 16

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1000 Cherry Road  
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