



An Epic Debate on Trump and True Evangelicalism

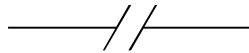
In which journalist Matt Labash (a Never Trumper) and radio host Eric Metaxas (a Trump supporter) agree to disagree

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRANDON CELI

Matt Labash, Eric Metaxas /

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Through the many upheavals of the Trump era, one trend has remained strikingly stable: the mobilization of the white evangelical community as diehard supporters of the forty-fifth president. It's a convergence of interests that, on paper at least, appears unlikely in the extreme. Trump's acquaintance with the Bible and its dictates might generously be described as "passing," and his personal conduct, both in his business dealings and his elective affinities, falls a good deal short of Christian ideals. How do sincere Protestant believers work through the many seeming tensions and contradictions that assail Trumpism as a de facto religious movement? To get to the bottom of things, *The New Republic* asked conservative journalist **Matt Labash**, a lifelong evangelical and ardent Never Trumper, to conduct an online dialogue on the vagaries of the Trump-evangelical relationship with bestselling author and radio show host **Eric Metaxas**, a no-less-ardent Trump supporter. The following exchange has been lightly edited for flow, style, and length.



MATT LABASH:

Eric,

Many years ago, I profiled a Christian professional wrestler named George South. He fought as a “heel,” or a bad guy. But not wishing to do his Christian testimony any harm, he would sport JOHN 3:16 on the seat of his banana hammock—the very same britches that he might fish a pair of brass knuckles out of to coldcock a referee while he wasn’t looking. I asked George how he accounted for the mixed messaging. He essentially said that sometimes you just have to climb into the squared circle, face the darkness, and hit someone over the head with a chair for Jesus.

On the surface, you and I have much in common. You’ve written biographies of Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I went to a Lutheran elementary school, and like Bonhoeffer, am no fan of Hitler’s. We have both spent much of our lives in evangelical circles. (I grew up Southern Baptist in Texas throughout the ’80s, and still go to a nondenominational evangelical church, or did, before Covid-19 turned us into a viral petri dish. Now, we worship in our sweats, remotely.) We both, without apology, pledge allegiance to our Lord and Savior, J.H. Christ.

That said, even though you are a Christian brother and coequal partner in the search for truth, a part of me wants to go George South on you, and hit you in the head with a chair for Jesus. (Figuratively, of course.)

Why? I’ll tell you why: Donald J. Trump. Yes, I understand he’s not president anymore, even if he seems to be having trouble grasping that fact. But for all the disk space he takes up in the consciousness of Republicans and evangelicals, the intersection of which is around 82 percent, he might as well be. While Trump had the lowest approval rating of any president since Gallup started keeping track in the 1930s, he scored 97 percent approval with the adoring crowd at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). This, after two impeachments and him headlining an insurrection. That alone is hardly surprising. When you run a cult, the cultists tend to see things your way.

But it's broader than that. Comb through recent survey results, and a disturbing picture emerges. A Suffolk University/*USA Today* poll in February—after Trump's coup attempt—had Republicans stating by a double-digit margin (46 percent to 27 percent) that they would abandon the GOP and join the Trump party if he created one. After months of Trump stoking conspiracy theories and all manner of delusional fever dreams—even though he was beaten in the election like a rented mule (both in the popular vote and the Electoral College)—a Lifeway Research poll found 49 percent of U.S. Protestant pastors claiming that they frequently hear their congregation members parroting current-event conspiracy theories. A January American Enterprise Institute poll reported 29 percent of Republicans and 27 percent of white evangelicals believing QAnon conspiracy theories. (Spoiler alert, Q-ball nutters: The Democratic Party has many faults, but being a Satanist-cannibal-pedophile ring is not one of them.)

Renowned pastor and Covid-truther John MacArthur has said that “any real, true believer” had to vote for Trump. Franklin Graham, the moral runt of Billy's litter, compared the 10 lonely House Republicans who voted for Trump's impeachment to Judas Iscariot, taking 30 pieces of silver in exchange for their immortal souls. (Really, Franklin? Try getting a Fox contract these days without being a Trumpbot.)

MATT LABASH: Like Trump, you spent months peddling his massive–election-fraud fantasy. You wrote children's books with titles like Donald Drains the Swamp.

And while I generally consider it bad manners to lunge for the jugular of a dinner guest before the salad plates have even been cleared, I have to say, you've been no slouch in the shamelessly shilling-for-Trump department, Eric. Like Trump, you spent months peddling his massive–election-fraud fantasy. You wrote children's books with titles like *Donald Drains the Swamp*. (Never mind his five or so Cabinet secretaries who resigned under ethical clouds; or his personal lawyer and campaign manager, both of whom went to prison; or the other former campaign manager who was merely indicted before collecting his presidential pardon.) You actually told Trump himself, “I'd be happy to die in this fight. This is a fight for everything. God is with us.”

I guess the question is: why? Why is he worth all this trouble? And how do we know God didn't vote for Biden, or maybe go third party?

I'm well aware of Paul's admonition that "God hath chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise." (If that's the case here, God would have really scored, because it'd be hard to pick a bigger fool than DJT.) But though I don't have my doctorate of divinity or anything, I have read the Bible a couple thousand times—even Trump's favorite parts, like "Two Corinthians. And nowhere do the Scriptures tell us: "Blessed are the mean-Tweeters, the sociopathic narcissists, the conspiracy-mongers, and seditionists, for they shall inherit the earth." It's just not in any translation I've picked up. (Maybe I should check *The Message*?)

I don't get it. It's dispiriting. I always thought we worshipped our Triune God. But somewhere along the way, say, around 2015, it seems like the Holy Trinity became a quaternity, with Trump batting cleanup for the Holy Ghost. (Trump did once admit that J.C. was more famous than him, though the latter never got canceled by Twitter.)

One gets the feeling that these days, if the Son of Man went walking on water across Florida's Intracoastal Waterway instead of the Sea of Galilee, he might be plowed under by a Trump boat parade, and possibly impaled on Franklin Graham's water ski. I'm not sure anyone would mourn. They'd likely be too busy anticipating the resurrection of their new-and-improved Orange Jesus.

ERIC METAXAS:

Matt—thanks for reaching out! Before we get into anything substantive, I really should be up front and say that to my knowledge I've never before had a public dialogue with anyone compromised by Mr. John Barleycorn—and if you prefer to call it hooch, that's fine. Who am I to judge? But right off the bat, I just want to give you major props for fearlessly leaping into this conversation on such short notice in your "enhanced" situation. (Your prose makes me guess Jägermeister shots, but whatever. Again, who am I to judge?)

The bottom line is that it's obvious you care way, way more about your country than about maybe saying things you might regret and that could come back to haunt you

and your chances at a Cabinet post in a Bill Kristol administration—so color me impressed, bro! I seriously appreciate your spirited, freewheeling Marx Brothers approach to public debate, and if more timid souls think you're straight up loco, that's on them.

But let's get down to brass tacks, as the kids say. I want to respond to what you've put forward. There is no question you've made a number of absolutely brilliant points. The only problem is that none of them make an appearance in what you've written today. I have it on good authority that in the past you've written many things that are incisive and provocative—even trenchant—and I have total faith that you'll get your mojo back at some point before Trump is reelected and impeached and acquitted for a record-breaking presidential three-peat. But if you don't get your mojo back during our conversation here and prefer to kick back and rest on your laurels, that's your business. Let's just say it's a matter that is between you and your God, David French.

ERIC METAXAS: Let me congratulate you on your willingness to take the controversial “Trump is a jerk” side of this public debate — and right here in *The New Republic*, too.

OK, maybe we do need to get serious, but it would be unconscionable for me to proceed without offering my sincerest congratulations on your willingness to take the controversial “Trump is a jerk” side of this public debate—and right here in *The New Republic*, too. It really would be wrong of me not to acknowledge the bravery you are exhibiting, knowing TNR MAGA readers are hating on you this very second. Your courageous stance here brings to mind my personal heroes Bonhoeffer and Solzhenitsyn, about whom I've written so brilliantly—as well as Evel Knievel, about whom I've not. But in my mind, you are this minute gunning your throttle just before you take off to jump the fountains at Caesar's, not giving the proverbial sheep-dip whether you somersault ass-over-teakettle as you go not so very gently into that good night on the far end, because that's just how you roll. (No pun intended there, my friend. None at all.)

I'm so sorry I now finally have to bring up politics, but seriously, check this out: I have this white nationalist conspiracy theory I'd like to share with you that—are

you ready?—Donald Trump is actually not Hitler 2.0. Hitler’s tweets would have been way, way meaner, and he would have had the SS shoot Comey, Brennan, and Clapper in the woods—and would have fed the “lovebirds” Strzok and Page to his German shepherd Blondi outside the laundry room at Berchtesgaden—instead of letting the whole gang keep trash-talking and landing sweet gigs at MSNBC. The other part of my kooky theory is that half the country voted for him because of his out-of-the-box hippie ideas, like cutting taxes and regulations to goose the economy and create jobs and other obviously racist stuff. While hanging with Derrida at Yale, I learned all about semiotics, so I know that creating jobs is just a dog whistle to hate folks who don’t look like me, specifically Ben Carson and Diamond and Silk. Were they even born in America?

Before I wrap up this installment, I have to ask: Why are people so divided? Can’t everyone in America just unite and despise Trump and his cracker followers together?! That’s what I love about everybody’s “Unka” Joe Biden. He understands that hating and canceling the former president and demonizing his Walmart-shopping supporters is a beautiful way of showing that you love America without actually loving America. You just know Joe wants to bring us all together in an uncomfortably long bear hug and kiss the boo-boo of the last four years—so why won’t we just let him?!

In that spirit, let’s try to focus on what we have in common, like believing that the Chinese Communist Party are our new BFFs and would never ever do anything like cover up the early facts about the Kung Fu Panda-demic (as Trump so rudely put it in that anonymously attributed story in the *Times*)—as though we can even joke about the country that is helping the NBA and Nike and Apple find a plausible work-around for the ticklish issue of using Uighur Muslim slave labor! Not while I’m still breathing. Free trade is magic, am I right?

While I have you on the phone, I should say I’m unfamiliar with the wrestler George South, but if you go after me with a folding chair, you honor me in so doing. I would enjoy braining you in return, but was always more partial to the stylings of Haystacks [sic] Calhoun and Bobo Brazil, who in my mind this minute are—alas and alack!—double-teaming you in a way that’s just not pretty, but that’ll get the job done, and then some. Bobo just hit you hard with his trademark “coco butt” to the noggin. And oh no! Haystacks is about to put the hurt to you from the altitude

of the turnbuckle; and, inasmuch as he trips the light fantastic at 600 avoirdupois, you'll forgive me if I look away.

Before I go, some quick questions while you're nursing your crushed torso back to full health.

1. Do you think the Hunter Biden laptop story was (a) actual Russian disinformation, (b) fake Russian disinformation, or (c) have to check with my buddies in the Deep State?
2. Do you think the media's refusal to cover that story weeks before the election was what Washington prayed for in the snow at Valley Forge? Be honest.
3. Remember when Beto was going to be our next president and how giddy you were? But did you even remember that his last name was O'Rourke? As in Sgt. O'Rourke from F Troop?
4. Do you believe a platonic friendship with Willie Brown has adequately prepared Kamala Harris to lead the free world?
5. Do you think the Nazis gassing millions of Jews was (a) objectively immoral, (b) a cultural issue where we'll just have to agree to disagree, (c) "above Joe Biden's pay grade" to determine, or (d) you'll circle back to me on that one?
6. Have you purchased my mind-blowing brand new book, Fish Out of Water: A Search for the Meaning of Life? If not, please go to MyPillow.com and use the code ERIC! Thanks for being a mensch, because that's what you are.



MATT LABASH:

Eric,

Brother-in-Christ or not, I'm going to have to cross-check you straightaway. I resent your insult. I wouldn't write on Jäger with Lauren Boebert holding any two of her several hundred guns to my head. Jäger is for children. And as Paul said in Trump's runner-up favorite book of the Bible, "One" Corinthians: "when I became a man, I put away childish things." And I'm afraid in your logorrheic delirium, you've confused me with someone else. I was never giddy about Beto. I detest 50-year-old skateboarders as much as I do licorice liqueurs favored by tween boys. Beto = biped Jäger shot.

MATT LABASH: Trump's killed truth, decorum, norms, good taste, decency, and nearly killed Mike Pence. And he's arguably an accomplice in sending to the afterlife nearly half a million Americans with his pandemic neglect and super-spreader evangelizing.

While I enjoy your Chuckles-the-Populist-Public-Intellectual stylings, I have to warn you I've been tussling with Trump-atons for five years now (many of them my friends and family), so I'm on to their preferred method of combat: dodge, parry, spin, thrust, dodge, dodge, dodge.... I'm still trying to crawl out from the tractor trailer full of straw men you just unloaded on me. You bring up Hitler an awful lot, and I freely concede that you're the Hitler expert here. So if it simplifies matters, I'm willing to stipulate that Trump is not Hitler 2.0. He's killed truth, decorum, norms, good taste, decency, and nearly killed Mike Pence. And he's arguably an accomplice in sending to the afterlife nearly half a million Americans with his pandemic neglect and super-spreader evangelizing. But he did not murder six million Jews. If you want to set the bar that low, then throw yourself a party for clearing it....

But now, maybe, we can discuss why it is our fellow Christians have knocked God off the throne to replace him with a short-fingered vulgarian who can't win the popular vote.

ERIC METAXAS:

Matt, you ignorant slut! By the way, nice callback to *Spy*'s '80s description of Trump as a "short-fingered vulgarian," which gets at the central issue concerning Trump that coiffed hommes like Graydon Carter (who is the perfect twin of an older German woman who once babysat for me) simply cannot bring themselves to articulate: embattled liberal privilege. That's the main reason they hate Trump and resort to sneering name-calling. They're so consumed with class-conscious and self-righteous animus they forget that adults have a moral responsibility to check their emotions and to ask important questions, like which candidate will stand up to the Chinese, who will do literally anything to accrue power, including murdering Uighur Muslims for their organs, because who's going to stop them? Or which candidate will actually create jobs for working-class people? So who's worshipping Trump?

ERIC METAXAS: Much like Luther, Trump connects with the working classes, sometimes via crude language, and doesn't look down at them over his pince-nez.

Much like Luther, about whom I've also written brilliantly, Trump connects with the working classes, sometimes via crude language, and doesn't look down at them over his pince-nez. I grew up among such people—as I mention with such elan in my new book, *Fish Out of Water*—and anyone who thinks they are racist or crazy or stupid is dramatically mistaken. They built this country and weren't about to vote for some addled Beltway palooka who described Obama as "the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy"—meaning, I guess, not quite as white-looking as Kamala Harris, but whatever. Yes, this is where we are now. Biden is a Potemkin village cipher fronting for a party that won't stand up to the socialist-woke madness destroying what was once the freest and most prosperous country in world history.

And if anyone was worshipped in our time, it was the "bright and clean" Hawaiian fellow spouting platitudes about Hope and Change, and "keeping your doctor," whose force of personality would unmelt the glaciers and speedily resurrect polar bears from Davy Jones's locker.

MATT LABASH:

Eric, I owe you a sincere apology. Didn't mean to trigger you with the *Spy* reference. (I forget, sometimes, that Trumpsters are a sensitive lot—they have feelings, too.) And let me also make it easier on you, so you don't feel compelled to keep shoving me into Binary Corner, and get tempted to put words in my mouth or to gin up some phantom position to react against things I don't actually embrace. I am not a neocon warmonger. I was against the Iraq War when most of the faux-populist Republicans who now pretend they were against it were still for it. I am not now, nor have I ever been, a member of an "elite." I was raised a military brat (often in Red America) and graduated from a bad state school after attending community college.

I have never owned pince-nez, though, at my advanced age, I did just secure a pair of reading glasses. I shop at Walmart at least once a week in my exurb, which handily voted for Trump. And since I lived in Germany for a while (military brat, as I said), Graydon Carter also reminds me of an old German woman. (At long last, we find agreement!)

I'll go a step further, and say I was in agreement, at least generally, with plenty of Trump's positions, even if I could never vote for him. I'm for securing our borders, and staying out of elective foreign wars, and lowering taxes (even if Trump gave Amazon a much, much bigger tax cut than I received, since he clawed back 90 percent of my deductions). I hate the wokerati, and censorship, and I didn't vote for Joe Biden. Nor did I vote for antifa, or urban riots, or Hunter Biden's laptop, or AOC, or all the other liberal boogeymen that you'd have thought, to listen to winger media, were on the ballot.

MATT LABASH: I have an acute memory of windy moralists aligning against a libidinous president who cut corners and had an elastic relationship with the truth. Back then, though, we didn't call him "Donald Trump." We called him "Bill Clinton."

In the early '90s, I even briefly worked for *The American Spectator's* infamous "Arkansas Project." So I have an acute memory of windy moralists aligning against a libidinous president who cut corners and had an elastic relationship with the

truth. Back then, though, we didn't call him "Donald Trump." We called him "Bill Clinton."

So what happened to all those God-haunted moralists? People like Bill Bennett, who became a Trumpster, who used to score millions writing *Books of Virtues*, but who came to support the most unvirtuous president of the modern age? What happened to championing "values," and "truth," and not desecrating things we supposedly hold sacred? What happened to these verities I've heard proclaimed over the course of my entire life in church—verities I still believe in? From the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me.... Thou shalt not commit adultery.... Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." The Beatitudes: "Blessed are the meek.... Blessed are the merciful.... Blessed are the peacemakers.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Or as Christ spelled out as one of his two most important commandments, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

I am not trying to be a provocateur when I say precisely none of this describes Trump, or the Trumpist movement that will likely outlive him, as some sort of preferred model for Owning the Libs. Many disillusioned conservatives have spent the last few years asking, "What happened to my party?" I'm asking what I think is a much more essential question: "What happened to my faith?" As in, to the practitioners and emissaries of it. What happened to the ones who have pliantly put a human kick-me sign on Christianity's back by pretending DJT is their standard-bearer, and that we should all fall in behind him?

After Trump's ridiculous speech at CPAC in February, in which he again sold his Big Lie, pretending he didn't lose the election, I was railing about him to someone I'll call a Trump-sympathetic friend—not a full-blown Trumpbot. He asked me, "Why does he still agitate you so much? He's not even president." I thought about it awhile, and countered that it's not that Trump is a con man or a liar. I actually covered Trump back in the '90s. Hung out with him, even. He is what he is, and, to his credit, he has never pretended to be anything else. (Other than, say, when he's pretended to be a Republican after being a Democrat, or to be pro-life after being pro-choice.) But the Trump you see is pretty much the Trump you get. We can both readily agree that he is the most transparent character in modern presidential history.

But what eats at me isn't the liar that he often proves to be, but the liars he makes of so many others. People I don't detest—indeed, people I love and respect. My ministers. My friends. My family. People willing to convince themselves that Trump is God's battering ram, instead of maybe being God's judgment—i.e., God leaving us to our own devices, letting us go down our own unrighteous path, because we're either too ignorant or obstinate to choose a higher one.

How do we justify this? Biblically? Theologically? With a clean conscience?

ERIC METAXAS:

ERIC METAXAS: You're offended that rather than do what such patrician fellows as Dubya did (smile silently while the left portrayed him as a simian jughead), Trump has dared to slap back.

I think I'm finally getting what you're saying. For reasons you deftly choose to leave unclarified, you hate Trump with an everlasting scorn and believe those who don't similarly hate him are idolizing him to the point of worship. You are disappointed that those who faulted Clinton for ruining the life of a barely legal intern—and more or less defecating in the Oval Office—aren't equally incensed that 1.4 decades before his own inauguration, a Manhattan billionaire real estate mogul cheated on his third wife and said something untoward on a hot mic. You're offended that rather than do what such patrician fellows as Dubya did (smile silently while the left portrayed him as a simian jughead), Trump has dared to slap back. This loutish false prophet has failed to understand that it is a long-standing tradition among civilized Republicans to sell their goober-booboisie constituency down the river for a mess of pottage to be named later, and never to criticize the mainstream media for believing they are Woodward and Bernstein (who themselves were never Woodward and Bernstein) when they high-handedly lie in the service of what they think is "truth" because it's their duty to the American people who are too stupid to organize the unvarnished facts in their uneducated heads. You are disappointed that self-professed followers of Jesus applaud Orange Hercules for daring to suggest the Augean Stables need cleaning when he himself has not yet publicly repented at the feet of the atheist dignitaries of the Fourth Estate for not losing with plastic dignity like Mitt Romney. Am I getting it?

But riddle me this, Bashman: Was it wrong for David to sling a stone into the forehead of Goliath of Gath, and then use the sword of the deceased to separate his head as a trophy? Do you think George Will would have disapproved of such behavior, and would have puckered into a fury, slapping David's knuckles with his lorgnette? Was it also unseemly for the Israelites to cheer David, and should they have instead held a candlelight vigil with tacky mylar balloons with slogans ("Philistine Pride" and "God Needed a Lumbering Angel in Heaven") for the deceased acromegalic killer, while Elton John elegized his all-too-brief life by singing "(Giant) Candle in the Wind"?



MATT LABASH:

Ahh, I hear you loud and clear. You spent your life making your bones in Christer world. But now that there's a new Cheeto Jesus in town, screw yesterday's fake news—Jesus of Nazareth—and his corny-ass Sermon on the Mount. He was a socialist hippie anyway, sashaying all over the land in his dusty Texas, trying to redistribute loaves and fishes. You'd rather follow in the footsteps of a true populist, the great Huey P. Long, who is infamously alleged to have said, "The time has come for all good men to rise above principle."

It's not that I haven't enjoyed our little debate—or food fight, if you prefer. Though I do confess I'd hoped we could introduce a little more light than heat, even though I did briefly fantasize about hitting you in the head with a chair for Christ. (My bad.)

But that was a prod and projection on my part. I wanted you to be Bonhoeffer, offering me your deep moral framework for why men-of-faith sometimes face the dilemma of choosing what would otherwise be considered ethically shaky alternatives. You, however, seem to aspire to be Sarah Huckabee Sanders: namely, an unconditional Trump flack, and a junkyard dog of deflection and genuflection, albeit one with a more extensive vocabulary. (I doubt Sanders has ever uttered the word *acromegalic*.)

MATT LABASH: Trump tried to overturn the will of the people. He tried to deep-six an election, the most sacred rite of our republic.

We're now 4,000 words into this death march, and you have yet to even acknowledge that the (former) president you continue to, yes, worship ("I'd be happy to die in this fight"—your words), who promulgated a big load of, yes, bullshit (sorry, God—put the profanity on my tab) that you helped spread on the radio and at rallies (his fraudulent–election-fraud caper), even trespassed on our civic morality. You have yet to acknowledge that Trump raised more than \$200 million from gullible Lou Dobbs fans who actually believed the election was stolen. (Maybe Trump has a future as a televangelist—Benny Hinn would be impressed.) You also have yet to acknowledge that Trump inspired and damn-near led the charge in the coup attempt against his own government. He tried to overturn the will of the people. He tried to deep-six an election, the most sacred rite of our republic. The violence that ensued from these efforts on January 6 killed five people. (Seven, if you include the two cops who killed themselves afterward.) It led to at least 140 cops getting injured, suffering everything from lost eyes and fingers to smashed spinal discs. It nearly led to Trump's own vice president and other elected officials getting torn to shreds by the mob. And all this for one very bad reason: so that Donald J. Trump could retain power. And you think it's just The Establishment that's corrupt? You really have nothing on the subject? No snappy comeback? Crickets?

Sorry, dude. I didn't like Bill Clinton, either. But maybe trying to overthrow your own government while nearly getting Congress killed outranks befouling a Gap dress in the hierarchy of outrages. And to be fair to Clinton, Trump was no piker in the sex-scandal department either, from paying off porn stars to being accused of

sexual assault, even if he wasn't on the federal clock. (Though I don't recall all the clucking fundies saying that Juanita Broaddrick's rape allegations against Clinton shouldn't be investigated since the alleged incident happened decades before. And I believed Juanita, for whatever that's worth.)

But I don't blame you for dodging the facts. I might, too, if none of them were on my side. And you taking a powder and abdicating moral responsibility? That's basically what the church —not all of it, but too much of it—has been doing for the last five years.

Yes, I get it. The wokesters and the antifa thugs and the Big Tech censors and the socialists and the fake news media are all cancers on America. OK, sure, maybe they are. But I've seen enough Trumpism to know that at the heart of it lies heart disease. And heart disease kills even more people per year than cancer does. (Though Covid has gained fast as the third-leading killer, thanks in no small part to Trump.)

The cultists can keep worshipping Cheeto Jesus if they want. It's a free country, at least until the Deep State says otherwise. But I'd direct them to turn their eyes back to O.G. Jesus. Put down *The Art of the Deal*, and return to the red letters, such as those in the Book of John, where Christ said, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed. And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

As Bill O'Reilly used to say, I'll give you the last word. I have to run downtown anyway. I'm writing this on March 4, and Q told me today is the day Donald Trump will be restored as president. Maybe I'll get the Inauguration Package at the Trump International Hotel, which is reportedly charging three times its usual daily rates. The Storm Is Coming.

ERIC METAXAS:

We are whistling past each other, *hermano!* Seriously.

Let me at least clarify what I know I meant in saying: "I'd be happy to die in this fight." It was quite unironically intended as something along the lines of Patrick

Henry's "give me liberty or give me death!" Or "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country," which was of course famously said by my fellow Yalie Nathan Hale 250 years ago, just before the British hanged him in an orchard not far from where I now live in Manhattan. He was 21.

Are we at a point where any such sentiments—or even the aspiration toward them—are automatically and cynically dismissed as hopelessly naïve and laughably archaic, or even as wild calls to violence? I know that what I said was not intended as trash-talking in the service of Trump, but rather as the heartfelt expression that one should be willing to give one's life in the cause of American liberty, since so many others have done so over the generations. Of course, I also get the idea you think Trump is to liberty what liberty is to tyranny, so that will just have to be a cultural difference between us.

But no kidding: For me and scores of millions of Americans, the optics of this election were unavoidably and disturbingly suspicious. When you see several swing states all stop counting mysteriously and then—mirabile dictu—suddenly begin again in the morning with the magical Biden votes in place, is it really so terribly odd that many of us wondered what the heck was going on? Were the videos of those trying to cover up the windows through which the official observers were supposed to be observing somehow sufficiently explained, and I didn't get the memo?¹ What's more disgraceful: that such things were upsetting to millions of Americans, or that those upset Americans were told that for expressing their concerns they were not Americans anymore?

So to regard our jaundiced view of how it all went down with bitter scorn, and as instantly dismissible conspiracy theorizing, is simply not very helpful to the nation, of which we jugheads on my side of this divide naïvely still think ourselves a part. That is not the helpful response one expects from those with a responsibility to encourage faith in our institutions and traditions.

Can you really be unable to imagine that those of us who felt deep and genuine concern about this election might not be gaslighting maniacs, but might actually be concerned citizens looking for assurances we did not get? Instead, we got the clear message that our support for this candidate—whom we dared think shared many of our worthy concerns—placed us beyond the respectable pale. But are you really

unable to fathom that we could wonder whether the folks who foisted the superlatively shitty “Russia Hoax” on the nation—and only months ago brazenly and straight-facedly dismissed the Hunter Biden laptop nightmare as “Russian disinformation”—might not be entirely trustworthy, and should do more than they did to assuage our concerns? When the response to what we earnestly believed was imperiously shouted down with one version or another of the refrain, “Shut up or we’ll cancel you, you white nationalist scum!” is it so impossible to see how we only became even more suspicious?

Would people really be confident that they won—and who profess to aspire toward “healing the nation”—behave anything like that? Lincoln was historically magnanimous after the Union defeated the Confederacy in the Civil War, knowing this was the only way forward in a nation so unprecedentedly riven. Could “with malice toward none” again be our watchword as Americans today? Lincoln would have had some very good reason to behave very differently, and to crush the vile Confederacy into the mud of the battlefields they had flooded with the blood of half a million young men. Why didn’t he? What did he see that those in power now cannot see or don’t wish to see? Or is Lincoln canceled now, and I forgot?

I admit that it’s seriously upsetting for me to think that you are genuinely convinced Trump—and so many of your fellow Americans—wanted to overturn the will of the people, not least because we honestly believe it was your side that was trying to do that, and maybe even did. But at least via our goofy passive-aggressive “dialogue,” I have at last come to see that you really do believe what you say, even if I disagree with you and flat-out still don’t get it. But can you believe I believe what I am saying, too? Can we at least give each other that much grace in this painful impasse?

Because if we are going to talk about what Jesus said, we cannot avoid talking about humility and grace. So from my perspective those Americans who have given themselves permission to self-righteously despise someone—and those like my mom and dad and all my relatives and most of my friends who voted for him—are not behaving according to the “better angels of our nature.” It is simply not the American way. But infinitely more important, as I know you will agree, it is not Jesus-like. You and I are commanded to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We both know on one level that’s insane and impossible, but we both

also know that on another infinitely truer level it is the very measure of sanity, and that with God all things are possible. That I know you know this gives me hope. And part of that hope is that you will believe—now or later—that I know it, too. God bless you, and, if it might be possible, let's please continue this wild and wacky dialogue. I dare say I think it has been more helpful than not—for which I humbly and sincerely thank you.

¹ Election officials at Detroit's TCF Center, where this incident took place, say that they placed paper and cardboard over the windows at the facility so that workers could better focus their attention, and tally election returns without feeling intimidated by the crowds outside the facility. One hundred and thirty-four election observers from each party were permitted inside to observe the count in real time.

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