Not in It to Win It: Why Choosing Sides Sidelines the Church

Over the years, I have deeply appreciated the messages and writings of Andy Stanley. He consistently brings fresh insights—anchored in Scripture—to a variety of important topics. Certainly

Not In It To Win It: Why Choosing Sides Sidelines the Church

is no exception. With gloves off, Stanley makes a poignant indictment of the Church:

The moment our love or concern for country takes precedence over our love for the people in our country, we are off mission. When saving America diverts energy, focus, and reputation away from saving Americans, we no longer qualify as the ekklesia of Jesus.

Throughout its pages, Stanley makes his case convincingly and offers this concluding challenge:

Want to see systemic change? Want to see America become great as Jesus defined great? Then somebody must stand apart from the legislative, executive, judicial, and political to address the hearts of those elected and selected to fill these essential and critical roles. We are that somebody. Somebody must model compassion, generosity, and empathy for those negatively impacted by the consequences of their own decisions as well as those suffering from the unintended consequences of imperfect systems. We are that somebody as well.

I recommend this book to every leader who wants to think deeply about how to lead those entrusted to their care in a manner that is faithful to the way of Jesus.

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Book Notes
to see what lies in store.

Chuck Olson
Founder | Lead With Your Life

Title: Not in It to Win It: *Why Choosing Sides Sidelines the Church*

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Book Description:

Is it possible to disagree politically and love unconditionally? The reaction of evangelicals to political and cultural shifts in recent years revealed what they value most. Lurking beneath our Bible-laced rhetoric, faith claims, books, and sermons is a relentless drive to

WIN!

But the church is not here to win. By every human measure, our Savior lost. On purpose. With a purpose. And we are his body. We are not in it to win anything. We are in it for something else entirely. That something else is what this book is about.

You'll discover:

- How to take a stand the right way. You'll learn how to make your case with a posture of humility and understanding, rather than being fueled by the fear of losing something.
- How to view politics through the lens of faith. Learn curiously, listen intentionally, and love unconditionally.
- How the life of Jesus and his teaching applies to modern-day challenges in a fresh way. The "biblical" stand may not be what we've been taught

.

Jesus never asked his followers to agree on everything. But he did call his followers to obey a new command: to love others in the same way he has loved us. Instead of asserting our rights or fighting for power, we need to begin asking ourselves: what does love require of me?

Book Quotes:

Throughout 2020 I encouraged the folks in our congregations to write a pandemic story they would be proud to tell. I would ask, "When 2020 is nothing but a story you tell, what story do you want to tell? A story of panic, fear, selfishness? Or a story of faith, compassion, fidelity, generosity?" I would remind them, "You're writing your pandemic story one decision and one response at a time. Write a good one!" LOCATION: 113

When life is predictable, it's natural to lose sight of what we value most, what we fear most. But when a tsunami of uncertainty rolls in, things get real, real quick. Uncertainty doesn't alter our value system. It exposes it. LOCATION: 119

While our actions don't always tell the whole story, our reactions most certainly do. LOCATION: 125

Consequently, folks who don't embrace our faith discovered what's most important to us as well. And while we may be surprised by what 2020 revealed about us, they aren't. They suspected it all along. Our response to the events of 2020 simply confirmed their suspicions—namely, that once you scratch off the veneer of our sermons and songs, we value what everybody else does. LOCATION: 131

And what does the evangelical church in America value most? Winning. What do we fear? Losing. LOCATION: 134

Not winning or losing souls. We systematically alienated more than half the souls in America through our un-Christlike rhetoric and fear-based posturing. LOCATION: 137

Toward the end of 2020, as the prospects of winning politically and culturally began to slip away, many high-profile evangelical church leaders behaved as rudely and as un-Christlike as their secular counterparts. In some instances, worse. In their attempt to save America from the other political party, they lost their opportunity to save half the American population from their sin. Consequently, we all lost influence. We all lost credibility. LOCATION: 161

Difference is inevitable. Division is a choice. LOCATION: 199

When Christianity is reduced to belief, we lose our voice. We lose our distinction. We're easily reduced to a constituency, a voting bloc that can be wined, dined, lied to, and bribed. By reducing Christianity to a pagan bifurcation of sacred and secular, we've abandoned our opportunity—our responsibility—to serve as the conscience of the nation. Once the church relegated Jesus to the role of forgiver of our sins rather than King of our lives, we opened the door to lesser kings. Thrones never remain empty long. LOCATION: 243

Pastors, like me, who refused to politicize our churches despite intense pressure and criticism. Our refusal to take a side was interpreted as refusal to take a stand—though, in fact, we had taken a stand. We were correctly and courageously refusing to politicize the ekklesia of Jesus. We were demonstrating our commitment to the Great Commission. We refused to alienate half our community by siding with one political party over the other. We chose to stand with Jesus in the messy middle, where problems are solved, rather than capitulate to divisive, broad-brush political talking points. LOCATION: 278

It's difficult to take a Christlike stand when pressured to choose a political side. It's hard to follow Paul's example when so many in the church prefer we simply preach like pundits. Still, like the apostle Paul, many courageous, gospel-centered pastors weren't in it to win an election. They were in it to win people. They weren't in it to save America. LOCATION: 283

When a local church becomes preoccupied with saving America at the expense of saving Americans, it has forsaken its mission. When church leaders embrace and grow comfortable with save-America rhetoric that alienates some Americans, they are derelict in their duty. When pastors and churches intentionally or unintentionally subjugate winning people to winning elections, they've already lost. Even if they win. LOCATION: 340

The moment our love or concern for country takes precedence over our love for the people in our country, we are off mission. When saving America diverts energy, focus, and reputation away from saving Americans, we no longer qualify as the ekklesia of Jesus. We're merely political tools. A manipulated voting demographic. A photo op. Again, we lose our elevated position as the conscience of the nation. We give up the moral and ethical high ground. LOCATION: 364

So what's the problem? What's fueling the tension and division? In a word: fear. Fear is the fuel. The sad truth is, the fear fueling our division has been created, cultivated, and stoked by those who benefit from it. Fear is profitable. Media companies want engagement and fear drives engagement. Wannabe leaders need followers. Fear draws followers. Fear-based messaging is nearly twice as effective as messaging that fails to stir that emotion. LOCATION: 424

Nothing divides like politics because nothing divides like fear. LOCATION: 436

Jesus didn't come to help any particular group succeed with their thing. He came to establish his own thing. His assembly. His ekklesia. His kingdom—a kingdom not of this world but very much for this world. A kingdom fueled by an others-first ethic that stood in sharp contrast to the winner-take-all, win-at-all-costs ethic that fuels the kingdoms of this world. LOCATION: 537

Publicly aligning a local church behind a political party or candidate is betrayal, pure and simple. Jesus didn't come to upgrade or fix something. He came to rule in our hearts and reign over our behavior. He claimed the role of master and commander-in-chief of those who would acknowledge his right to rule. He was not and is not a religious figure. He is a king. LOCATION: 554

Public alignment with a candidate or party is a betrayal of the church's imperative, our mandate, to make disciples. Anything that serves as an obstacle to that simple imperative should be eliminated from a local church. LOCATION: 576

Are you willing to follow Jesus regardless of where he leads you politically? LOCATION: 884

To tease that out a bit, are you willing to embrace the others-first kingdom ethic of Jesus when it requires you to keep your mouth shut and your opinions to yourself so as not to lose influence with outsiders? Are you willing to serve rather than cancel? Love rather than demonize? Pray for rather than publicly criticize? LOCATION: 885

It was Christianity, not the Democratic or Republican Party, that shaped Western civilization. It was the teaching of Jesus, not the planks of our current political platforms, that laid the foundation for our modern sense of justice, fairness, and dignity. LOCATION: 928

Jesus inaugurated an upside-down kingdom. A kingdom of the heart. A kingdom of conscience. A kingdom that would challenge and eventually flip the self-evident, self-centered scripts of the ancient world. In the end, he would voluntarily lay down his life for his subjects rather than demanding they lay down their lives for him. And he would require his followers to lay down their lives for one another. LOCATION: 1125

How we treat, talk about, respond to, and care for one another is the identifying mark of a genuine Jesus follower. Not what we believe. Nobody knows and nobody is better off because of what we believe. Doing makes the difference. Doing changed the world. Love, as Jesus defined it, for one another is our differentiator, which means our love for one another should be noticeable, notable, and distinct. According to Jesus, anyway. The new-covenant brand of love Jesus calls us to is neither easy nor natural. That's what makes it noticeable, notable, and distinct. LOCATION: 1238

Our unwillingness to be kind to, pray for, serve, honor, and speak respectfully to and about those we differ with politically is evidence that we, in fact, consider ourselves greater than our Master. LOCATION: 1347

Jesus played to lose so the other team could win. Jesus played to lose so sinners like you could win. So sinners like me had a chance. And a second chance. And a third. LOCATION: 1358

We're not winning, as Jesus defined winning, because we've decided that something else is more important than oneness. As a result, to leverage Paul's words, we are biting, devouring, and destroying one another. We're running the wrong race. We're striving for the wrong prize. We are more concerned about the loss of religious liberty than our loss of unity. We're more concerned about who's in the White House than we are about the division in the church. We're more concerned about everything there is to be concerned about than we are the one thing Jesus was most concerned about. LOCATION: 1736

Unity is not a "nice to have." Unity is mission critical. LOCATION: 1754

We cannot accomplish the will of God without unity because unity is the will of God. God's will for you is that you become one in purpose with me. God's will for me is that I would endeavor not to allow anything to divide me from you. The more unalike we are, the better. The more reason we have to dislike one another, the brighter. The legitimate and not-so-legitimate reasons you have to dislike me are opportunities. The legitimate and not-so-legitimate reasons I have to avoid and criticize you are opportunities as well. LOCATION: 1755

The enemy of the church is not the other political party. The enemy of the church is division.

LOCATION: 1764

Your party will win or lose based on voter turnout on a given Tuesday in November. The church will win or lose—our communities will win or lose—based on our response to Jesus's new-covenant command and our refusal to let anything or anyone divide us. LOCATION: 1772

With that in mind, I would like to invite Christian leaders everywhere to break with a tradition many of us inherited from previous generations of Christians. A tradition that was grafted into our faith from outside our faith. A tradition leveraged before the Reformation, that was elevated to literally breathtaking heights during the Reformation. A tradition that has diluted and distracted Christianity for centuries. What exactly am I talking about? The age-old tradition—and bad habit—of importing warfare language and conflict imagery into a faith whose central figure surrendered his life rather than defending it and who invited his followers to follow suit. LOCATION: 1803

So let's be the generation of Jesus followers that buries this longstanding tradition. A tradition that undermines our credibility. Worse, a tradition that stands in stark contrast with the message, posture, and approach of our Savior. Jesus was not at war with anyone. The church is his body. So it stands to reason that the church is not at war with anyone. LOCATION: 1812

Jesus commanded us not to go to war with individuals or organizations that consider us the enemy. We are not to repay evil with evil. Or violence with violence. You may be their enemy. But they are not yours. We may be their enemy. But they are not ours. Because we are not at war. With that in mind, here's yet another career-ending suggestion. LOCATION: 1836

Let's discontinue the centuries-old tradition of importing Old Testament military imagery, narratives, and metaphors into our new-covenant preaching, teaching, and application. LOCATION: 1842

Both Old Testament and end-times warfare imagery and language are incompatible with the new-covenant mandate of Jesus. A mandate given directly to us. A mandate to love, make disciples, and lay down our lives in the process if necessary. LOCATION: 1849

Refusing to import Old Testament imagery that conflicts with our new-covenant mandate isn't just about theological correctness. It's about the Great Commission. It's about evangelism. It's about the ekklesia of Jesus functioning as seasoned salt and unfiltered light. It's about ensuring that the life-changing new that Jesus unleashed in the world doesn't get retrofitted with something old or something reserved for the future. Retro is fine for your middle school daughter's bedroom. Cinematic depictions of the final apocalypse are great for entertainment. Neither is fine for the church. LOCATION: 1864

As mentioned earlier, we are not at war with the culture. Culture-war Christianity is not simply a waste of time, it is diametrically opposed to the teaching of Paul and the example of Jesus. As it relates to the influence of the church, our nation's challenges do not stem from the church's inability to convince unbelievers to behave like believers. Our challenges stem from the church's inability to inspire believers to behave like believers. LOCATION: 1890

What Jesus commanded us to do is our business. We should mind our own business. We should get back to business. We should look for feet to wash, not a war to fight. LOCATION: 2093

Here's my point in bringing this up: I wish with all my heart that we would follow the example of the apostle Paul and unhitch our tone, our terminology, our approach to people, and our posture toward culture from the tone, approach, and posture toward others that permeates old-covenant narratives. I wish we, like the leaders of the Jerusalem Council, would muster the courage to distinguish our new-covenant faith from a covenant we

were never included in to begin with so that we, the body of Christ, would be free to fully embrace the kingdom values, kingdom ethics, and kingdom message that Jesus "set loose in the world." LOCATION: 2359

If you're convinced that 2 Chronicles 7:14 applies to or can be applied to the United States, you have some unhitching to do. That was a message for King Solomon after he completed the construction of the temple in Jerusalem. God was reiterating his commitment to the existing cause-and-effect covenant he'd established with the nation of Israel in the days of Moses. God doesn't have a covenant with America. God has a covenant with you! A better covenant. A permanent covenant. A covenant established in his Son's blood. LOCATION: 2388

The self-serving, self-preserving, culture-warrior posture that characterizes certain streams of evangelicalism today stands in sharp and disappointing contrast with the new-covenant behavior that characterized the early church. Believing has become a substitute for following. We've been so focused on not substituting works for faith that many of us have quit working. Or in Paul's words, we quit working out our faith. LOCATION: 2439

Faith that doesn't do good is no good. LOCATION: 2449

Everything Jesus instructed his first-century followers to do was simply first-century application of his single new command. If the church ever chooses to reestablish that single command as the standard against which all our behavior is evaluated, we may regain our shine. LOCATION: 2676

The way of love sounds soft until we consider that it culminated in a man hanging from a cross drenched in his own body fluids. Embracing the full scope of crucifixion removes any modern misconceptions regarding the way of love. Christian behavior—all Christian behavior—should be informed by the sacrificial love of Jesus. LOCATION: 2728

When you're not sure what to say or do, ask what loves requires of you. LOCATION: 2744

I'm convinced a significant percentage of evangelicals would, in fact, disapprove of Jesus. He was too passive. He refused to fight back. He wasn't in it to win it. LOCATION: 2762

Imagine a world where people were skeptical of what we believed but envious of how well we treated one another. Imagine a world where unbelievers were anxious to hire, vote for, work for, work with, and live next door to Christians because of how well we treated one another and how well we treated them. LOCATION: 2789

Are you disturbed by people talking at rather than to one another? Are you bothered by the condescending tone and dehumanizing terminology that characterizes so much of our national conversation? That's not a political problem. That doesn't change or improve if your candidate wins. If your candidate wins, it might get worse. Jesus labeled this behavior a heart problem. "For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Everything that disturbs you about our nation, along with everything that disturbs you about you, can be directly or indirectly linked to that short list. Jesus caps it off with this: "These are what defile a person." LOCATION: 2941

Everything that disturbs you about the United States emanates from the sinful, selfish, self-centered, appetite-fueled, fear-driven condition of the human heart. Our government can protect us from it. But our government is powerless to do anything about it. No system of government, no political platform, no bill, law, or mandate can change a human heart. LOCATION: 2951

Want to see systemic change? Want to see America become great as Jesus defined great? Then somebody must stand apart from the legislative, executive, judicial, and political to address the hearts of those elected and selected to fill these essential and critical roles. We are that somebody. Somebody must model compassion, generosity, and empathy for those negatively impacted by the consequences of their own decisions as well as those suffering from the unintended consequences of imperfect systems. We are that somebody as well. LOCATION: 2983

After all, Jesus said we are the light of the world, not the US Congress. We are a city on a hill, not the United States of America. We are the salt of the earth. We are the body of Christ. The hands and feet of Jesus. Jesus, who did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus, who refused to be appropriated by a party so he could address the hearts of people in both parties. Jesus, who stopped to listen, paused to heal, and gave his life for the very men who took it. Jesus who lost. Jesus who won. LOCATION: 3059

Let's not settle for being law-abiding citizens or patriotic Americans. We're called to something higher than that. More demanding than that. We're Jesus followers. So let's take up our crosses and follow. LOCATION: 3070

Let's live, love, and lead in such a way that we, the ekklesia of Jesus, regain the moral high ground and can serve as the conscience of our nation. Let's do what's just, not what we can justify. Let's do what's responsible, not what's permissible. Let's do what's moral, not what's modeled. Let's stop trying to win. Let's forsake our fear of losing. Let's fix our eyes and our lives on Jesus. LOCATION: 3075

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle "location" is provided after each entry.