

I'm a Magnificat Christian

John 3:16 or Matthew 25? Both. Neither.

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Now and then, someone will ask me “what kind of Christian” I am. I never used to know how to respond.

I would ramble on about how I’m sort of a theological moderate, though it’s not that helpful to think of us Christians as existing on a linear continuum, and I’m less focused than some of the Christians I grew up with on individual salvation, not that I think it doesn’t *matter*, and I’m wary of efforts to convert people of other faiths, which isn’t to say that I don’t value evangelism or the uniqueness of Christ... By this point the person typically lost interest in my endless run-on sentence of negative definition and preemptive defensiveness. I was left wishing I’d just said, “Lutheran.”

Then came the 2008 election and the Matthew 25 Network, Mara Vanderslice’s pro-Obama political action committee. I wasn’t wild about a biblically themed PAC, but you already know how that post goes. My point here is that soon after that, someone put the question to me this way: Are you more of a John 3:16 Christian, or a Matthew 25 Christian?

Both, I said. I refuse to choose, I added. Incapable of leaving it at that, I went on—something about how concepts like “believe,” “perish,” and “everlasting life” are not as straightforward as the people holding those end-zone signs might think, and/or about how the identity of the oft-cited “least of these” is ambiguous and, in any case, that passage culminates in some pretty judgment-y stuff. Wouldn’t it be interesting—now I was really getting into it—to poll these single-passage Christians and see how many of them, on either side, know that in context the liberals’ choice is far more explicitly afterlife-focused?

No, said my questioner's face, it wouldn't. Later, I realized what I should have said. I'm a [Magnificat](#) Christian.

And (if and only if they asked me to elaborate): Personal belief matters; so do good works. But the gospel is about God's work to reverse the world's power structures and priorities. The hungry won't be hungry forever—not because they get saved and go to heaven when they die, and not because good Christians have compassion on them. Because the God of the universe fills them with good things and sends the rich away empty.

"Luke 1:46-55" might look good on a cardboard sign, but it's hard to imagine naming a PAC for it. The passage sounds downright seditious: God *brings down the powerful*? Would a candidate even want that endorsement?

So I don't blame elected officials for declining to call themselves Magnificat Christians. But I think of this whenever the White House press office sends out faithy comments by the president, who talks about faith so often that it's easy to forget that the people behind the Matthew 25 Network used to have a hard time convincing Democrats to do this at all.

At the Easter prayer breakfast earlier this month, Obama quoted John 3:16 and multiple "good deeds" passages; he talked a lot about following Jesus' example. In a short statement for Easter weekend, he pointed to the need to "follow Christ's example by loving God and loving our neighbors." In his weekly address on Holy Saturday, Obama's main takeaway from the Triduum was that it "remind[s] us of our responsibilities to God and, as God's children, our responsibilities to one another."

Then the president quickly referenced both John 3:16 and the "least of these."

[Later last week](#), Hillary Clinton claimed that in the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus "was teaching a lesson about the responsibility we all share to step up and serve the community."

Yes, Democratic leaders have learned to use the Bible to talk about good deeds and personal salvation alike. It's not likely these powerful people will be as eager to learn new talking points about a God who brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly. But that's in the Bible, too.

There's no actual need for Christians to pick a single passage. But if pressed, I'll take the Magnificat.