

The following essay is included in the inaugural Spirited Debate essay collection, “White Evangelical Christians and Politics.” This collection includes competing perspectives from Peter Wehner, “What’s God Got to Do with Renewing American Democracy?,” and Samuel Atchison, “The Kind of America I Believe In.” To see all the Spirited Debate essays currently published and continue reading about the PRRUCS Religion & Democratic Renewal project, see [Spirited Debate](#).

God and Country: Effective Citizenship as Christian Duty

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In the nearly five decades since evangelicals broke onto the American political scene after a half century of self-imposed exile, no constituency has been subjected to greater vitriol and abuse. The *Washington Post* once accused politically active evangelicals of being “poor, uneducated, and easy to command.” A liberal columnist called them “Shiite Baptists,” and *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich called their leaders the “reigning ayatollahs of the American right.”ⁱ

Virtually every marginalized constituency that has moved from powerlessness to full participation in civic life in our history has been celebrated: women, union workers, African Americans, Hispanics, gays and lesbians. By contrast, evangelical Christians have been accused of a lust for power, idolatry, rank hypocrisy, and authoritarianism. This double standard is troubling in a nation where tens of millions of Americans take their religious beliefs seriously and see their citizenship as complementing their faith rather than contradicting it. It suggests that our nation’s elites may be so disconnected from a large number of their fellow citizens that they may be incapable of understanding, much less expressing, empathy for their views.

This divide is demonstrated by the recent effort to label evangelicals “Christian nationalists” and claim they endanger democracy itself. James Carville once hung a sign in the Clinton campaign headquarters declaring, “It’s the economy, stupid.” Now he claims it is about religion, saying Christian nationalists are “a bigger threat than al-Qaeda to this country.”

A survey by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in February found that one in ten Americans held so-called Christian nationalist views, and that “three in ten Americans qualify as Christian nationalism adherents or sympathizers.”ⁱⁱ

It is hard to conceive of a more benign constituency than people who work hard, read the Bible, pray regularly, and attend church weekly. But according to this narrative, millions of Christians threaten the survival of American democracy and possess a strong disposition toward authoritarianism and even political violence.ⁱⁱⁱ

David French, op-ed columnist at the *New York Times*, contends Christian nationalists want majority rule by believers that would “upend our Constitution and fracture our society.” He argues the ideology makes evangelicals “gullible and potentially even dangerous.”^{iv} How dangerous is not clear, but French suggests they see their opponents as fundamentally evil, capable of doing anything, including stealing an election. (As a veteran of the 2000 Bush-Cheney campaign, I find this observation strange, given that I can personally testify to the fact that the Gore campaign attempted to keep counting ballots in Florida until it changed the outcome of a certified election, an outcome prevented only by the Supreme Court’s decision in *Bush v. Gore*.) Disputes about election results may be ugly, but they are not a function of Christian nationalism. This is not to defend the excesses of the “Stop the Steal” movement or the mob that breached the Capitol on January 6, only to point out that challenging a certified election did not begin with Trump supporters, Christian or not.

Heidi Przybyla published an investigative report in *Politico* claiming that Christian nationalists had infiltrated the MAGA movement to advance an extremist agenda. She expressed alarm that they “believe that our rights as Americans, as all human beings, don’t come from any earthly authority. They don’t come from Congress, they don’t come from the Supreme Court. They come from God.” After conservative Christians pointed out on social media that this idea came not from Christian “nationalists” but from the Founding Fathers and was enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, Przybyla apologized.^v

The definition of a Christian nationalist is subjective to the point of incoherence. The PRRI survey, for example, asked a series of questions, then gave each respondent a “composite score” and assigned them to corresponding groups: “adherent,” “sympathizer,” “skeptic,” and “rejecter.”^{vi}

One such question was whether respondents believed “U.S. laws should be based on Christian values.” But a 2020 survey by Pew Research Center found that nearly half of Americans agree the Bible should have some influence on US laws, and a 2022 survey found that 45 percent of Americans believe the United States should be a “Christian nation.”^{vii} Are they extremists, too? After all, Christian values include helping the poor, showing compassion to immigrants and reforming the criminal justice system. Good things, all.

The PRRI survey also asked whether our nation can survive “if the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations.” Answering in the affirmative could qualify one as a Christian nationalist. But given the rise of social pathologies like crime, delinquency, and drug use linked to family breakup and fatherless households, is it unreasonable to advocate for the time-honored values found in the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule? One certainly hopes not.

This reminds me of the rhetorical question once asked by former Watergate convict-turned-prison evangelist Chuck Colson: If you encountered two men walking towards you in a dark alley late at night, would you feel safer if you knew they had just left a Bible study?

It is a sad commentary on our current political divisions that orthodox religious faith, which social science has found is strongly correlated with positive social behaviors like marriage, child-rearing, charitable giving, and volunteerism, is now seen by many as a threat to social stability and the constitutional order.^{viii} In my experience, evangelical Christians merely seek to protect their rights under the Constitution, especially freedom of speech, association, and religion. These rights are fundamental to a healthy civil society and a thriving democracy.

So why the smear campaign against evangelical Christians? It could be dismissed as cynical politics—Hillary Clinton’s “basket of deplorables” meets Elmer Gantry. The Democrats’ strategy of making abortion the top issue in the 2024 campaign certainly makes evangelicals a convenient bogeyman.

Yet the deliberate defamation of evangelical Christians is more than a clever campaign strategy or proof of the triumph of secularism. Stripped of its academic jargon and pretense, it is a fashionable but insidious bigotry that seeks to marginalize and disqualify from our civic discourse tens of millions of Americans who take their faith seriously.^{ix}

Ironically, there was a time when the media and opinion elites celebrated evangelical civic participation. When Jimmy Carter, the most explicitly evangelical president since Woodrow Wilson, won the presidency in 1976 in part because of strong support from born-again evangelical voters, *Newsweek* lauded what it called “The Year of the Evangelical.” Carter won the presidency invoking his Christian faith, claiming to have been “born again,” promising to never tell a lie, and pledging to deliver a government as good as the people. This soothed the American psyche like a balm of Gilead after the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate.

But once Carter took office, evangelical disappointment proved profound. Under Carter the IRS sought to enact a new regulation that required Christian schools to prove they were not functioning as segregated academies or risk losing their tax-exempt status. This was a dagger aimed at the heart of Christian education. A National Women’s Conference in 1977 funded by the government promoted abortion, gay rights, and the Equal Rights Amendment and featured prominent feminists Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem. First Lady Rosalynn Carter addressed the gathering, adding the president’s imprimatur to the proceedings. Evangelical women recoiled at Carter’s embrace of what they saw as a radical feminist agenda.

Carter appeared feckless after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and Islamic radicals in Tehran seized fifty-two American hostages. He lectured the American people about their “inordinate fear of Communism” and decried a spiritual “malaise” in the country, leading George Will to acidly comment that Carter’s message was “I’m unpopular, therefore you’re sick.”^x Carter’s manifest failures left evangelicals feeling betrayed by one of their own.

In a series of private consultations that has been rarely reported, Billy Graham and Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ reached out to faith leaders and recommended they meet with Ronald Reagan, who was laying the groundwork for his third presidential campaign. It seemed an odd choice: Reagan was a divorced former Hollywood actor, did not claim to be “born again” (though he had a deep, even mystical, Christian faith), and had signed the most liberal abortion law in America as governor of California. (Reagan would later call it the biggest regret of his political career.)

Reagan became the first pro-life nominee in the modern history of the Republican Party and served as the midwife in the alliance of evangelicals and the GOP. He publicly endorsed the evangelical political movement at an evangelical gathering in Dallas the day after accepting the GOP nomination, saying, “I know that you can’t endorse me, but . . . I want you to know that I endorse you and what you’re doing.” Reagan cast the Cold War in starkly moral terms, denounced the IRS war on private and church schools, and pledged to appoint strict constructionists to the Supreme Court.

Critically, Reagan sympathized with evangelicals bringing their faith to bear on public policy and rejected the notion that doing so threatened the rights of others or violated the separation of church and state. “If we have come to a time in the United States when the attempt to see traditional moral values reflected in public policy leaves one open to irresponsible charges,” Reagan told the faith leaders, “then the structure of our free society is under attack and the foundation of our freedom is threatened.”^{xi}

In the general election, Reagan won roughly two-thirds of the self-identified evangelical vote on his way to a forty-four-state landslide. Republicans also gained control of the US Senate for the first time since 1954 and, with a coalition of conservative and pro-life Democrats, won an ideological majority in the House of Representatives. The South, where nearly half of all evangelical voters resided, went from solidly Democratic (minus only Virginia) to solidly Republican (minus only Georgia). It was the most significant demographic transformation of the US electorate since the emergence of the Catholic union voting bloc between 1928 and 1932, which political scientist V. O. Key identified as the linchpin of the FDR coalition.

This shift in the tectonic plates of American politics was caused primarily (though not entirely) by the abortion issue, changing the party allegiance of millions of evangelical Christian voters. Evangelicals viewed abortion through the prism of their moral beliefs. Their understanding of Scripture and the Declaration of Independence taught them that God was the author of life, that every human being was made in God’s image and endowed with inalienable rights, and that government was established to protect the life and liberty of every person, including the unborn child.

Pro-life organizations distributed literature in churches that highlighted verses from the Psalms and the New Testament that suggested life began in the womb. Some pointed to the story recorded in the Gospel of Luke of John the Baptist leaping in his mother's womb at the presence of Mary, who was then pregnant with Jesus, as proof that the Bible taught that the unborn child was alive.^{xiii} For Roman Catholics, the social teaching of the Catholic church had for centuries stressed the sanctity of life and the divine role of men and women in creating human life in God's moral design.

Initially, many evangelical voters continued to support pro-life Catholic Democrats such as David Bonior of Michigan, the third-highest ranking Democrat in the House in the 1980s, and Governor Bob Casey of Pennsylvania. Over time, however, the base of the Democratic Party drifted left, its liberal base became less tolerant of pro-life views, and pro-life Democrats retired or lost their races, thinning their ranks. By the time Barack Obama became president, the remaining roughly two dozen pro-life Democrats in the House had negotiated a funding mechanism for elective abortions under Obamacare that made them vulnerable in the 2010 election. Virtually all were defeated. Abortion became a partisan issue, and at this writing there is only one pro-life Democrat left in the House of Representatives.

Roe v. Wade also forced evangelicals to confront the fact that their values no longer held sway in the deliberations and decisions of their government. The federal judiciary seemed hostile to their religious beliefs and ability to express them in civic spaces, creating what Richard John Neuhaus called "the naked public square" and Yale professor Stephen L. Carter called a "culture of disbelief."

The Supreme Court seemed inimical to public expressions of religious faith, contributing to this hostile legal culture. Two years before *Roe*, the Supreme Court ruled in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* that the salary supplements paid to teachers at religious schools by some states violated the establishment clause. The decision created a "lemon test" to determine whether a statute violated the establishment clause, including by considering whether it had a predominantly secular purpose or whether it advanced religion. As applied by the federal courts, this test proved subjective and ambiguous, with the result that church-state jurisprudence displayed increasing opposition to religious faith.

In 1980 the high court ruled that it was unconstitutional to display the Ten Commandments in a Kentucky classroom even though the display had been paid for with private funds and was not used to proselytize students.^{xiii} In 1992 the Supreme Court ruled that a prayer by a rabbi at a high school baccalaureate ceremony was unconstitutional, despite the fact that attendance was voluntary for students and the prayer offered was nonsectarian.^{xiv}

To evangelical Christians, such landmark decisions threatened not only their faith but their constitutional rights. During the 1980s and 1990s, Christian legal groups like the American Center for Law & Justice (ACLJ), the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, and the Alliance Defending Freedom took action to combat the American Civil Liberties Union, which litigated extensively on First Amendment issues. Christian litigators like Mike Farris, Alan Sears, and Jay Sekulow took cases to the Supreme Court that could sway a majority of justices, arguing that proscriptions on religious expression violated freedom of speech under the First Amendment. The strategy was to gradually chip away at existing precedents without requiring the justices to overturn them. The ACLJ won cases giving Bible clubs the right to meet in public schools, allowing churches to use school facilities, and protecting a city or state's display of a Ten Commandments monument as a form of governmental speech. It also won the right of pro-lifers to protest at abortion clinics in *Bray v. Alexandria Women's Health Clinic* (1993), which would later be cited by the *Dobbs* court for its finding that the goal of prohibiting abortion did not constitute invidious discrimination against women.

The success of this litigation hinged on the appointment of conservative judges to the federal appellate courts, especially the Supreme Court. This required a president to nominate them and a conservative Senate majority to confirm them. This is where the moral concerns and the legal strategy of the faith community intersected with politics. It is why the evangelical movement collaborated with the conservative legal community (led by the Federalist Society) and the Republican Party. It was a strategy forged in adversity following the “borking” of Robert H. Bork during his contentious and failed confirmation to the Supreme Court in 1987. As the pro-life movement came closer to a majority on the high court, the stakes grew higher, the politics grew nastier, and the goal of a pro-life majority became both elusive and within grasp.

Abortion turned judicial confirmations into a blood sport, with lobbyists and organizations on both sides of the ideological divide mobilized in a pitched battle for control of the high court. Each

skirmish led to an escalation of the conflict. In 1991, Clarence Thomas was confirmed 52–48 in the closest confirmation vote for an associate justice of the Supreme Court in US history after Anita Hill’s salacious allegations against him. In 2003, Democrats filibustered the nomination of Miguel Estrada to the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, because they feared it would credential him to be appointed as the first Hispanic to the Supreme Court, ultimately forcing Estrada to step aside. When Republicans retaliated by filibustering President Barack Obama’s nominees to the DC Circuit Court, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid changed Senate rules to abolish filibusters of the executive calendar.

In February 2016, Justice Antonin Scalia unexpectedly died, and the Republican Senate declined to hold a confirmation vote for Merrick Garland, who had been nominated by Obama to fill the vacancy. This decision, made by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell without consulting with his colleagues, was intended merely to keep the seat open until the voters had rendered their judgment in the election of a new president. But it would play a crucial role in the election of Donald Trump and persuaded many evangelicals, despite their reservations, to support him.

Trump became the first major party nominee in US history to release a list of jurists from which he pledged to select his nominees to the Supreme Court. While Trump’s public list initially was intended as a checkmate of Ted Cruz’s rival candidacy, it became a vital selling point to socially conservative leaders and activists. The 2016 election marked the first time the American people had gone to the polls in a presidential election with a vacancy on the high court that would tip the balance of the majority since 1860, when proslavery ideologue Peter Daniel died in May and President James Buchanan chose not to nominate a successor until after the election. Without Trump’s promise to choose Scalia’s replacement from his public list, it is doubtful that many evangelicals would have been willing to support a candidate they viewed with such skepticism.

Some have dismissed abortion as a tool rather than a motivating force in evangelical political involvement. But to minimize abortion’s significance in the trajectory of evangelical civic engagement requires a suspension of disbelief. How else to explain the dramatic shift in the voting patterns of evangelicals after *Roe*, the rise of Reagan and the transformation of the GOP from a Chamber of Commerce party concerned with business to a pro-life party with an evangelical base, or the brutal confirmation battles for the Supreme Court? These are rendered unintelligible apart from

the abortion issue. Abortion shaped the contours of American politics more than any issue in American history apart from slavery, free silver and a bimetallic currency, and temperance, and it propelled evangelicals back into the fray over public policy, often against their will.

It is not an accident that the repeal of Prohibition, the experiment that was the capstone of the last great Protestant social reform movement, occurred in 1933, just eight years after the Scopes Trial. By then Prohibition had become a colossal failure, and its enforcement had been a dead letter for years. Politics had failed evangelicals, subjecting them to discredit and ridicule. In this context, abortion created a crisis for people of faith, for it showed that total withdrawal could endanger the moral tenor of the larger society, undermine the common good, and threaten the innocent and defenseless. Who is more innocent and vulnerable than an unborn child?

Joining the pro-life movement also forced evangelicals to rub shoulders with Roman Catholics and Mormons, both of whom they had viewed negatively for theological reasons, an antipathy that often curdled into bigotry. It shattered the parochialism of fundamentalism and forced evangelicals to join a coalition of those with whom they had deep differences. This represented a seminal and transformational moment in the history of evangelicalism and fundamentalism, ushering its adherents into full participation in the civic life of the nation.

The tragedy of abortion also gave the religious conservative movement its moral high ground. Just as abolitionists in the period before the Civil War viewed chattel slavery as a grave national sin that both invited and required God's judgment, pro-life evangelicals saw abortion on demand by judicial fiat as morally wrong, constitutionally dubious, and politically indefensible.

There was occasionally a downside to their ardor. As one would expect of any constituency that had not engaged in the national political debate for decades, the founders of the religious conservative movement often acted with a zeal that betrayed their lack of knowledge and experience. Some claimed America was a "Christian nation," that evangelicals should be represented in government according to their share of the US population, and that atheists were "termites" eating away at the foundations of American liberty. Their prophetic voice resembled a clanging cymbal to the secular ear, and many confused their theology with their public policy agenda.

But this phenomenon was hardly unique to the so-called religious right. Nor were the jeremiads by Jerry Falwell and other evangelical preachers against sensuality and sinfulness unusual in the evangelical prophetic tradition. In 1965, Billy Graham published *World Aflame*, in which he decried a nation awash in “immoral acts of such depravity they cannot be recounted here,” claimed humanity was in the end times, and predicted “judgment is coming.” He cited one historian who claimed, “The moral deterioration in the West will destroy us by the year 2000 even if the Communists don’t!”^{xv} That same year Norman Vincent Peale warned that America’s immorality and licentiousness would lead to its extinction. Peale argued that “a society either chooses sexual promiscuity and decline, or sexual discipline and creative energy,” and no civilization that permitted widespread immorality could survive “for more than one generation.”^{xvi}

Indeed, apocalyptic rhetoric is a common feature of social reform movements. The antislavery movement included defenders of John Brown, temperance activists took axes to saloons, suffragists chained themselves to the fences of the White House, and the civil rights movement included figures like Malcolm X who compared the white man to the devil and advocated violence. All these movements eventually tempered the sharp edges of their rhetoric to appeal to the broader society, making it possible for them to achieve many of their aspirations, though not without social disorder. Every successful social reform movement in history moves from the fringes of society to the mainstream over time. The same is true of the religious conservatives.

Pete Wehner suggests that too many evangelicals see their political opponents as enemies. I have not found this to be the case. I recently met with a Republican member of Congress who is an evangelical Christian and serves in House leadership. When I walked into his office, he was sitting at his desk writing a personal note. He explained he was sending it to one of the most liberal Democrats in the House who had been recently diagnosed with cancer to let them know he was praying for their recovery. Similar acts of kindness and grace are performed every day by Christians serving in government and in the political arena. They go unheralded both because they are private and because they don’t fit the caricature of evangelicals as hateful scolds. Evangelicals are portrayed by the media as boorish and judgmental, especially towards their political adversaries, but this is not the reality.

I attend a church in the suburbs of Atlanta that is theologically conservative, but the congregation is multi-ethnic and multiracial and my guess is many do not share my politics. The church has a pastor working with immigrants and refugees in a nearby apartment complex, sharing the Gospel, leading Bible studies, and providing for personal needs like diapers and day care. It also supports inner-city ministries that provide food, blankets, job training, and housing to the homeless. No reporter has ever asked to visit my church to cover these ministries. They are too busy covering the story that is their single-minded obsession: evangelical political involvement. This narrative dominates media coverage until it overwhelms the richer, complex, and far more nuanced reality of the faith community.

In June 2022, my organization, Faith & Freedom Coalition, held its national policy conference in Nashville, Tennessee. More than 500 Hispanic and African American pastors and community organizers attended. A *Washington Post* reporter shared that he had never attended a center-right gathering where Spanish was spoken in the hallways as often as English. Impressed, he interviewed the director of our Hispanic division, Fey Libertad, and told me he would write a story. But the story never ran. I can only speculate why, but what is not a matter of conjecture is that it did not advance the false narrative that evangelical Christians are disoriented by the increasing diversity of the country and are motivated by a fear of the “other.”

There are many challenges facing our society: a humanitarian crisis at our southern border, a lack of trust in major US institutions, declining marriage and fertility rates, growing gaps in wealth accumulation, a permanent underclass with few opportunities for upward mobility, a growing mental health crisis, and the deep polarization of our politics. It is hard to argue that people of faith are the source of these problems, and I believe they can be part of the solution.

After a half-century of civic engagement, attempting to persuade evangelicals to return to the stained-glassed ghetto of the past may be as effective as yelling at the tides. The two most dominant strains in the American civic character can be traced to the Great Awakening and the rise of the colonial assembly in the second half of the eighteenth century. The former created a cleavage between “New Light” and “Old Light” Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations from New England to Virginia that later reflected support or opposition for the American Revolution. Thomas Paine, an avowed atheist, wrote *Common Sense* in 1776 and compared loyalty to George III

with the ancient Israelites asking God to give them a king. Paine knew his audience and spoke in the language of his readers, using their Biblical lexicon of idolatry and sin. As the breach with England loomed, evangelical preachers lacerated the mother country for its venality and corruption, proclaiming that America had “no king but Jesus.” Simultaneously, the colonial assembly gave the colonists the ability to govern many of their own affairs during the period of parliamentary “salutary neglect” between 1740 and 1760, creating a false sense of self-determination in the minds of the colonists that ended abruptly, with far-reaching consequences.

These twin strands in the American DNA—religiosity that reflects political views and self-government as both a right and practice—are inextricably linked. To attempt to deny or delegitimize their influence is likely futile. As historian Whitney Cross and others have demonstrated, counties in the North with a large presence of converts to Christianity following the Second Great Awakening were also most likely to be antislavery and vote heavily Republican. The same would later be true in the post-Civil War period when voting patterns in support of temperance closely tracked church attendance and the presence of evangelical Protestant voters.

It was this deeply religious society that Alexis de Tocqueville encountered when he came to the United States in the 1830s and wrote *Democracy in America*, which remains the single most accurate portrait of the American people by a foreign observer. “Religion,” he concluded, “should be considered the first” of America’s “political institutions” as Americans strove to “maintain Christianity . . . at all cost.”^{xvii}

Robert W. Fogel has argued that between roughly 1970 and 2000 the United States experienced a Fourth Great Awakening, characterized by the rise of religious broadcasting that brought the Gospel message to an unprecedentedly large audience, an emphasis on personal holiness, a return to theological orthodoxy (dramatically demonstrated by the rise of conservatives within the Southern Baptist Convention), and the doubling of membership in evangelical churches and denominations. Whether or not Fogel is correct, there is no question that significant spiritual ferment took place within in the United States during this period, that manifest in the Jesus movement, the charismatic renewal, the growth of broadcast ministries like Christian Broadcasting Network and the Trinity Broadcasting Network, and the “Washington for Jesus” prayer rally in 1980. All of these events

transformed evangelical Protestantism. As in prior spiritual awakenings, it is plausible to conclude that this religious phenomenon then naturally impacted US politics.

My friend David Kuo proposed in *Tempting Faith* that evangelicals take a brief pause or fast from politics, arguing that politics had assumed an exaggerated importance in their lives to the detriment of spiritual concerns. Yet that proposal, like similar ones by Cal Thomas and Rod Dreher (in *The Benedict Option*), has found few takers. Rather than try to persuade evangelical Christians to step back from politics or practice it in a highly constricted way, it may make more sense to educate them on the history of social reform movements and affirm their involvement as part of a cherished and uniquely American tradition of bringing faith to bear on public policy. Civic engagement properly understood will increase their maturity and effectiveness, as well as give them a healthier understanding of the limits of politics.

Teddy White once quipped that Barry Goldwater found ideas fascinating because they were so new to him. Not a fair critique perhaps, but the same observation could be made of evangelicals in relation to politics, especially at the dawn of the so-called religious right. The evangelicals who poured into the political process in the late 1970s and 1980s found politics fascinating in part because it was so new to them, and as a result they held an unrealistic view of what it could deliver. That is no longer the case.

Evangelicals have changed politics, but it has also changed them, I believe in ways that are mostly positive. They have come to understand that compromise does not require surrendering one's principles and that, in Ronald Reagan's phrase, an 80 percent friend is not a 20 percent enemy. They have discovered that working within a political party means agreeing to disagree without being disagreeable and that coalition politics presupposes differences. Their public policy organizations are far more likely to be led today by a former elected official, a longtime policy strategist, or a former Capitol Hill staffer than by a preacher. This has not entirely eliminated missteps or miscalculations, but it has professionalized the movement and increased its reach and effectiveness.

To advance a broad policy agenda based on Biblical principles, religious conservatives have also learned to seek opportunities for bipartisan cooperation on issues like pornography and abortion in the 1980s and 1990s (when there were 40–60 pro-life Democrats in Congress) and more recently

criminal justice reform and immigration reform. Most importantly, they have embraced their rights and responsibilities as citizens of the nation they love, making them less cloistered and inward-turning. We are better as a nation for their doing so.

A final point: What about the evangelicals who so harshly criticized their coreligionists for backing Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020? Some urged a vote for a write-in or third-party candidate, while others supported Joe Biden. To the extent that they contributed to Joe Biden's election, do they bear any responsibility for the many failures of his presidency? Biden promised to bring the country together again and instead has brought greater division than ever, denouncing his political opponents as racists and fascists. Is this the civility they hoped for?

Biden's precipitous and petulant decision to withdraw from Afghanistan caused the murder of thirteen and the severe wounding of forty-five American servicemen and women by terrorists, the abandonment of an estimated nine thousand Americans (not to mention twenty thousand Afghans who had assisted US troops), the transfer of billions of dollars in US military equipment and weapons to the Taliban, the poignant and tragic deaths of civilians who fell from the fuselage of US cargo planes, and the transformation of Kabul into a safe haven for al-Qaeda.

The Afghan debacle also encouraged Vladimir Putin to attack Ukraine without fear of serious consequences. While this turned out to be a severe miscalculation on Putin's part, one cannot blame him for making it. Biden flew halfway around the world to meet with Putin in his first year as president and lifted US sanctions on the Nord Stream pipeline without asking for anything in return. This increased Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas and provided hard currency for Putin's military machine. Biden then stated at a news conference that "a minor incursion" might result only in "a fight about what to do and not to do," sending a clear signal that a Russian invasion would be met with a minimal US response. The results have been disastrous: the bloodiest conflict on the Eurasian continent since World War II, with major cities reduced to rubble and untold death and human suffering.

In a similar miscalculation, Biden sent diplomats to Europe to negotiate reentering the Iran nuclear deal and then weakened US sanctions on the regime in Tehran. This enabled Iran to access \$10 billion in frozen funds owed to it by Iraq, increase its oil exports by 80 percent compared to the low

point under the Trump Administration's maximum-pressure campaign, and reap between \$32 and \$35 billion in additional oil revenue according to an estimate by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. The Biden administration also handed over \$6 billion to Iran in a hostage exchange deal. This financial largesse allowed Iran to dramatically increase funding to its military proxies, including Hamas, a move that was critical in giving Hamas both the funds and the operational capacity to execute the October 7 invasion of Israel. Hezbollah, another Iranian terrorist proxy, is currently firing hundreds of missiles into Israel at civilian targets.

It is fair to ask whether these military conflicts, loss of life, and the bold aggression of terrorist and dictatorial regimes dedicated to the defeat of the United States, Israel, and the West would have occurred under Donald Trump. Wars on multiple continents after Biden's many diplomatic miscues stand in contrast to the Abraham Accords under Trump, which marked the greatest progress towards peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors since the Camp David Accords.

Allow me to conclude by offering some suggested principles to guide the civic witness of evangelical Christians in the future. These are offered in the hopes that it will make them more effective citizens and enhance their most important mission, which is to share their faith with the lost and to bring light to a dark world.

A Theology of Civic Engagement

Citizenship as Witness

The first element of a workable theology of civic engagement is an emphasis on exercising citizenship as a way of witnessing one's faith and glorifying God. If the objective of civic engagement is to honor God by respecting one's rights and responsibilities as a citizen, then the outcome of an election or a political struggle is in God's hands, not ours.

My friend Pete Wehner suggests that the early Christians did not engage in politics. It is true they did not distribute voter guides for the obvious reason that they did not have the right to vote. But there is much evidence of robust political debate among the Jews in Judea and Samaria to whom Jesus ministered. Jesus selected as two of his disciples Matthew, a tax collector for the Roman empire, and

Simon the Zealot, a member of a terrorist political party committed to the overthrow of the Romans. This was no accident. By choosing disciples from diametrically opposed political parties, Jesus conceded the reality of political divisions in society while also asserting that the Kingdom of God transcended them.

Neither Matthew nor Simon the Zealot was an ascetic; both were engaged in the rough-and-tumble world of politics. Jesus would later go to the cross taking the place of Barabbas, who had been involved in an insurrection against the Romans. On the other side of the divide were the Herodians, who advocated cooperation with the Romans as the best strategy to preserve the Jewish faith and nation. Jesus declined to be drawn into these political controversies. But when asked by the tax collector what he should do to be righteous, Jesus didn't tell him to quit collecting taxes for a brutal Roman occupier. He simply told him to collect no more tax than was due and to treat his fellow Jews with justice.^{xviii} Jesus acknowledged political differences as a fact of earthly life while teaching "My kingdom is not of this world."

Years later, when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem after causing a riot while preaching the Gospel, Roman soldiers prepared to scourge him. He turned to the Roman soldier about to flog him and asked, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"^{xix} The Book of Acts records that the commander of the Roman cohort in Jerusalem became frightened when he learned he had mistreated Paul and violated his rights as a Roman citizen.

When the Pharisees tried to have Paul returned to Jerusalem for a show trial, he exercised the most precious right of a Roman citizen and appealed his case to Caesar. The journey from Damascus and Jerusalem to Rome only occurred because Paul viewed his Roman citizenship as his birthright and defended his rights. Whether because of Paul's ministry or others, the Bible records that members of Caesar's household converted to Christianity.^{xx} The Gospel message reached the throne of the most powerful ruler the world because Paul chose to exercise his citizenship in a robust and serious manner.

The evidence is clear that early Christians took their citizenship seriously and exercised all the rights that flowed from it. So, too, should Christians in our time.

Christians in the United States are effectively dual citizens who carry two passports. One citizenship is earthly and corresponds to their status as Americans, with all the duties and obligations and rights attendant to it, including paying taxes, registering to vote, voting, and participating in the political party of their choice. The second passport is for a heavenly citizenship in the Kingdom of God, with responsibilities to read the Bible, pray regularly, attend worship services, tithe and contribute to the needs of the saints, and care for the poor. Both citizenships are important, both are gifts of God, and both glorify Him when exercised.

An understanding of citizenship as witnessing to the Christian faith shifts the emphasis of civic engagement from temporal triumph to eternal glory. It changes the perspective of the political activist from winning political or legislative victories to glorifying God and sharing His good news. If our freedoms come from God, and if the sole purpose of establishing government is to safeguard and protect those rights, then we fail to honor God when we decline to act as citizens. The outcome of our civic engagement is in His hands, but if our objective is to honor God, we cannot lose, no matter the results.

A Biblical Agenda That Transcends Parties

The Bible rarely provides a clear, succinct answer to most of today's contemporary political issues. But the Bible does provide teaching in both the Old and New Testaments that can be applied in a general way to current matters.

In its initial foray into politics, the religious conservative movement was motivated primarily by abortion, pornography, and school prayer. Over time, that issues agenda broadened to include taxes, immigration reform, human trafficking, and criminal justice reform. The Bible contains teaching and principles that apply to every area of life. The most effective Christian civic engagement seeks to apply these Biblical principles to public policy in ways that promote the common good. They may not fall neatly into existing partisan categories.

During my tenure at the Christian Coalition in the 1990s, we “cast a wider net” by making our top legislative priority the adoption of a child tax credit to relieve the tax burden on middle-class families with children. We also lobbied for the passage of welfare reform because we believed welfare

consigned many families to dependency on government, undermined the institutions of marriage and family, and led to a loss of work and human dignity. The \$500-per-child tax credit became part of the Contract with America, passed a Republican Congress, and was ultimately signed into law by Bill Clinton. President George W. Bush doubled the child tax credit to \$1,000, and it was one of the centerpieces of the Bush tax cuts. Congress passed and Clinton signed sweeping welfare reform that removed from the welfare rolls two million people, most of whom found jobs or pursued an education.

President Trump doubled the tax credit to \$2,000 per child, benefiting more than forty million American families. The Trump tax cut also doubled the standard deduction for families to \$24,000 for married couples filing jointly. These two reforms lifted eleven million Americans out of poverty, including more than five million children, and along with the minority job growth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, constituted the most effective antipoverty initiative since the Great Society.

Critics have claimed that tax and budget policy is far afield from a “moral” or “Biblical” agenda. Not true. Saddling future generations with trillions in debt to pay for the spending binge of their parents or grandparents is a reversal of the Biblical principle that parents are to provide for their children. Moreover, according to the principle of subsidiarity, sound policy encourages and enables parents to provide for their children rather than transferring those functions to government. The institution closest to the human need—in this case the family—should meet that need because it possesses both the compassion and knowledge to provide the greatest care and solutions. This is why the child tax credit has been one of the most important contributions to fiscal policy in the post-World War II period.

Probably no issue needs the application of Biblical principles more than immigration reform. Many evangelicals do not fit neatly into either the Democratic or Republican Party. The Democrats have become a party of open borders and amnesty, while the Republican Party has become increasingly restrictionist and focused only on building a border wall. Bridging the partisan divide has proven nearly impossible, even in resolving the fate of so-called “Dreamers,” the children of illegal aliens who were brought to the United States through no fault of their own and are now in legal limbo. The result is that even though all acknowledge the current immigration system is irretrievably broken, Congress has not passed major immigration reform legislation in thirty-eight years. The

result is a porous southern border, millions of illegal aliens openly violating the law, and the exploitation of women and girls by human traffickers.

A better approach to immigration policy would be to show compassion for the alien and stranger, which the Old Testament instructed because the Jewish people themselves had been so mistreated as aliens in Egypt.^{xxi} Under Old Testament law, aliens were subject to the same laws as the Israelites, and that means there must be secure borders and respect for the rule of law. Finally, to strengthen both the economy and the family, immigration policy should prioritize entry for workers and the spouses and minor children of legal residents. Under the current immigration system, many children of legal residents are waiting in queues that are decades long because of the existing country-based quota system, and they will not be able to join their parents until they are in their mid-twenties. This is immoral, and wrong.

My organization has also worked on a bipartisan basis with many Democrats and liberal public policy groups on criminal justice reform to provide effective and humane alternatives to traditional incarceration for first-time nonviolent offenders. We have also worked to provide “good time” credits for those incarcerated for participating in GED equivalency programs, twelve-step, and other programs designed to free offenders from chemical dependency and addiction, and to offer job-training programs. The First Step Act signed into law by Donald Trump was the most sweeping criminal justice reform legislation in over a generation, and it would not have happened without faith-based public policy organizations or the Trump White House.

Keep the Church Focused on Its Spiritual Mission

The church was not commissioned to carry out a political mission but to share the Gospel, make disciples, and care for the poor and needy. Individual church members should be encouraged and educated about how to speak out on timely issues, become involved in the political party of their choice, contact their elected officials on issues, and vote in elections. This division of duties will keep the church from becoming a political institution while ensuring that the voice of faith is heard and resonates in the larger society.

Sometimes the government infringes upon the First Amendment rights of believers, as in the case of some states requiring that churches be closed during the COVID-19 pandemic while allowing liquor stores and massage parlors to reopen. This may require more direct action by churches or pastors to inform elected officials on how their congregations are impacted. But this tends to be the exception to the rule.

Churches can and should educate their congregations on what the Bible has to say about current issues. It wasn't possible in the 1850s for churches or denominations to ignore slavery or in the 1950s for churches to pretend segregation didn't exist or that it wasn't dividing society. The same is true today of issues like abortion and gender. Which issues to address and how will necessarily vary from church to church and is ultimately a matter of prudential judgment. It may be best to address them not in a sermon on Sunday morning but in a teaching delivered at a separate time for those who are interested. The goal should not be to push members of the church to one party or the other but to ensure that their thinking on current issues is shaped by Biblical teaching, not the culture.

The late Chuck Colson argued that those who claim believers should “just take care of the church and tend to our knitting” were wrong because “there’s an intelligent way to engage the culture in every area, including politics.”^{xxiii} Where Christians remain silent and sheltered in their churches, evil can spread to the detriment of the larger society. Jesus taught that believers are salt and light. This is primarily a spiritual principle, but it has a civic function as well. If churches remain focused on their spiritual mission and instruct their members on the proper role of citizenship, then Christians can witness their faith and Biblical beliefs in the civic arena without the church becoming a political vehicle.

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Notes

- ⁱ Frank Rich, “Rudy, the Values Slayer,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2007.
- ⁱⁱ Public Religion Research Institute & the Brookings Institute, “A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture,” February 28, 2023.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Ralph Reed, “The Smear Campaign Against ‘Christian Nationalists,’” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2024, from which the prior three sentences are drawn.
- ^{iv} David French, “What is Christian Nationalism, Exactly?” *New York Times*, February 25, 2024.
- ^v Heidi Przybyla, “The Right Way to Cover the Intersection of Religion and Politics,” *Politico*, February 29, 2024.
- ^{vi} This and the following seven sentences are drawn from Ralph Reed, “The Smear Campaign Against ‘Christian Nationalists,’” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2024.
- ^{vii} Pew Research Center, Report, October 27, 2022.
- ^{viii} Ralph Reed, “The Smear Campaign Against ‘Christian Nationalists,’” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2024.
- ^{ix} The prior five sentences are drawn from Ralph Reed, “The Smear Campaign Against ‘Christian Nationalists,’” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2024.
- ^x Mark Tooley, “Jimmy Carter, Malaise & Christianity,” Institute on Religion and Democracy, July 22, 2018.
- ^{xi} Ronald Reagan, remarks to the National Affairs Briefing of the Religious Roundtable, August 22, 1980, Dallas, Texas.
- ^{xii} Luke 1:41–42.
- ^{xiii} *Stone v. Graham* (1980).
- ^{xiv} *Lee v. Weisman* (1992).
- ^{xv} Billy Graham, *World Aflame* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 12, 20–21.
- ^{xvi} Norman Vincent Peale, *Sin, Sex, and Self-Control* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 55–56.
- ^{xvii} Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Originally published as two volumes in 1835 and 1840.
- ^{xviii} Luke 2:12–13.
- ^{xix} Acts 22:25.
- ^{xx} Philippians 4:22.

^{xxi} Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:33–34.

^{xxii} Amy Sullivan, “Q and A: Religious Leader Chuck Colson,” *Time*, September 24, 2009.